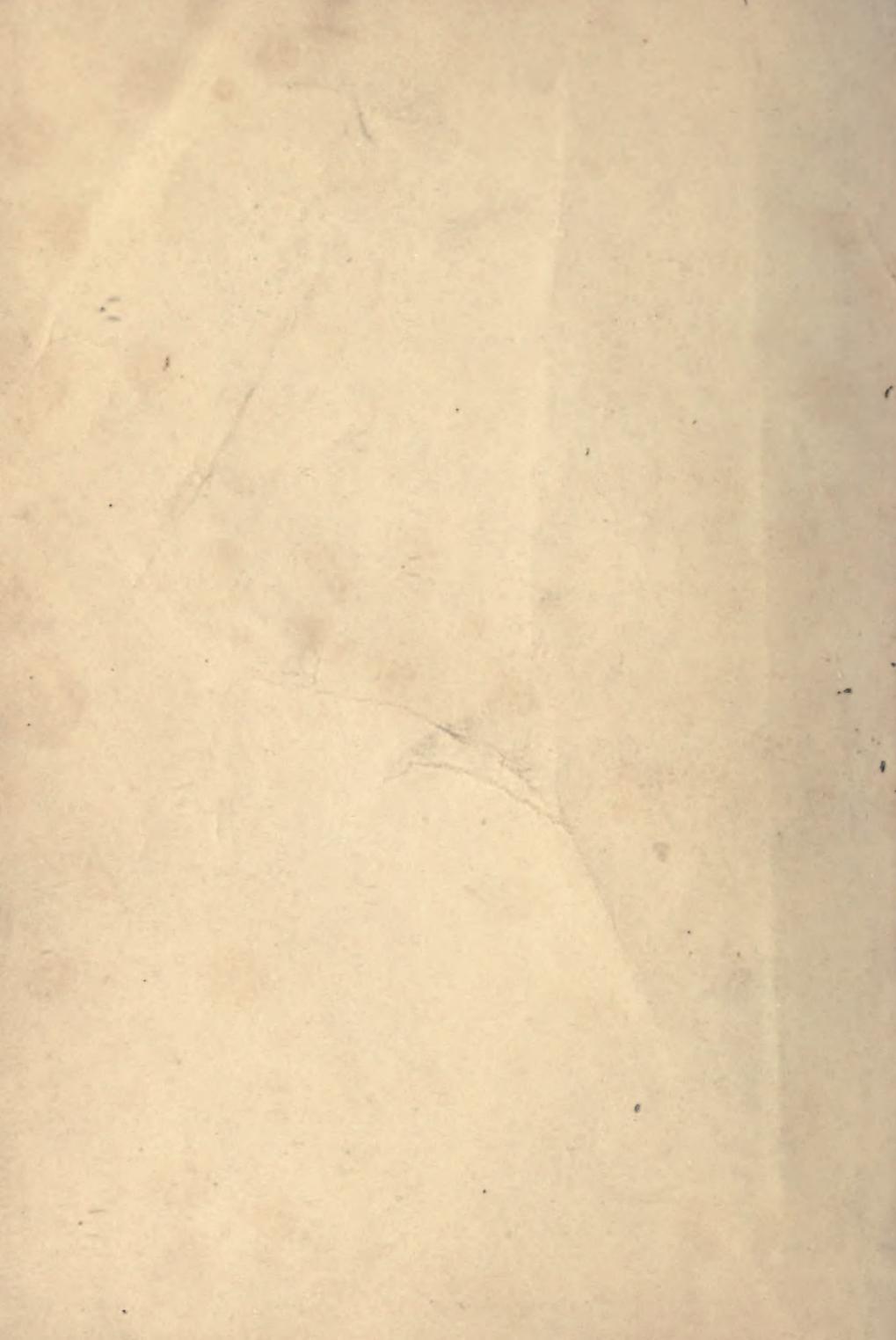




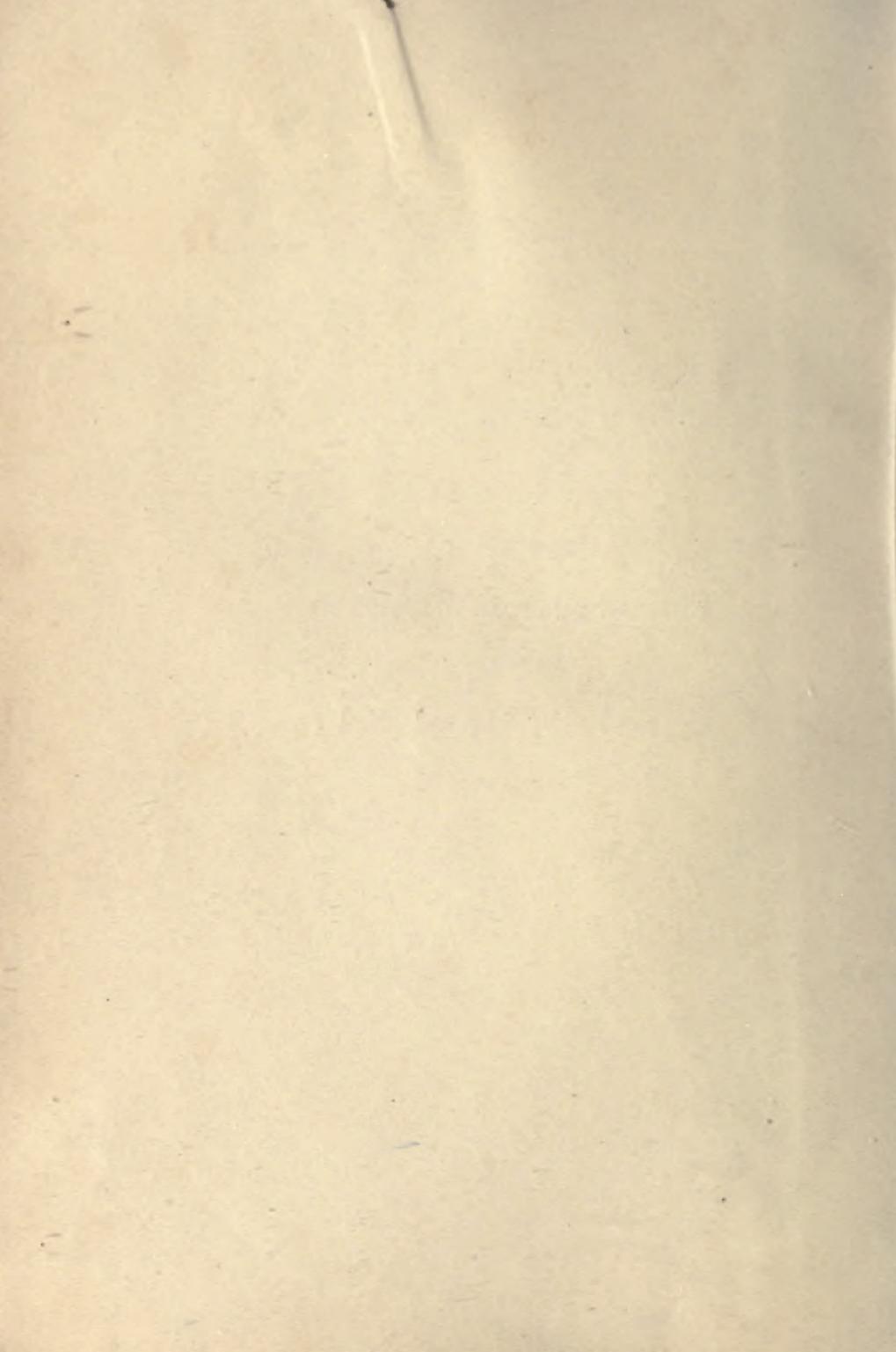
Presented to the
LIBRARY of the
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
by

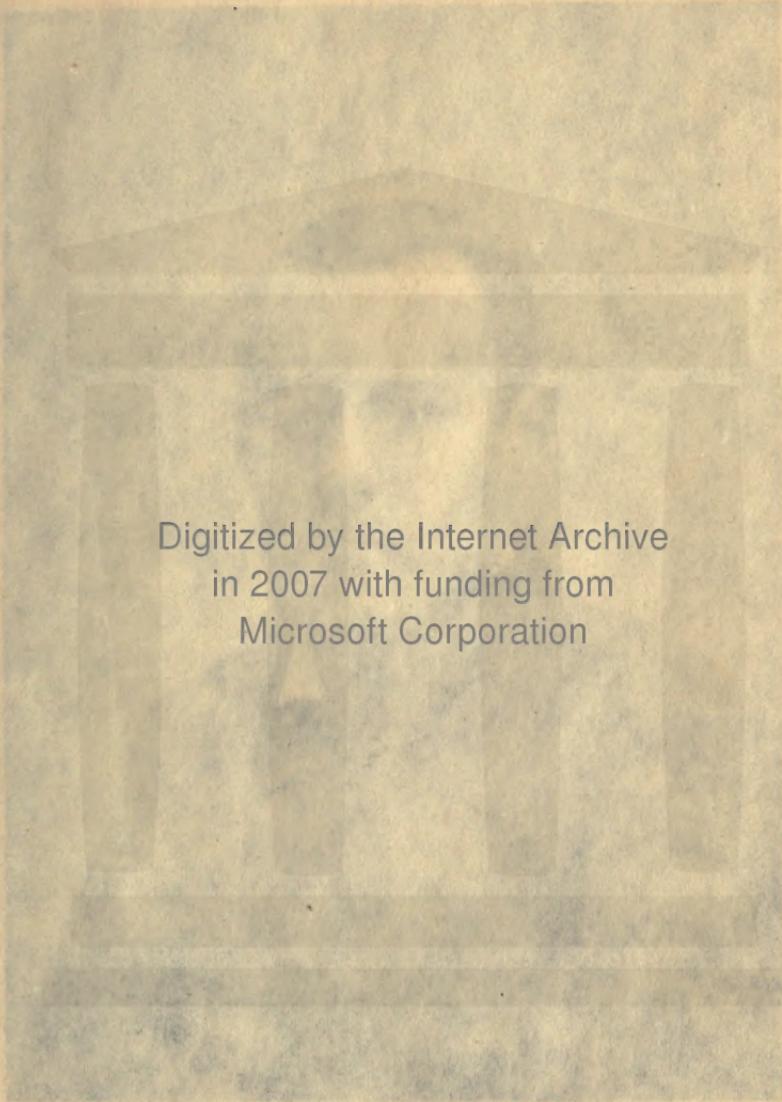
DOCTOR JOHN F. PORTER



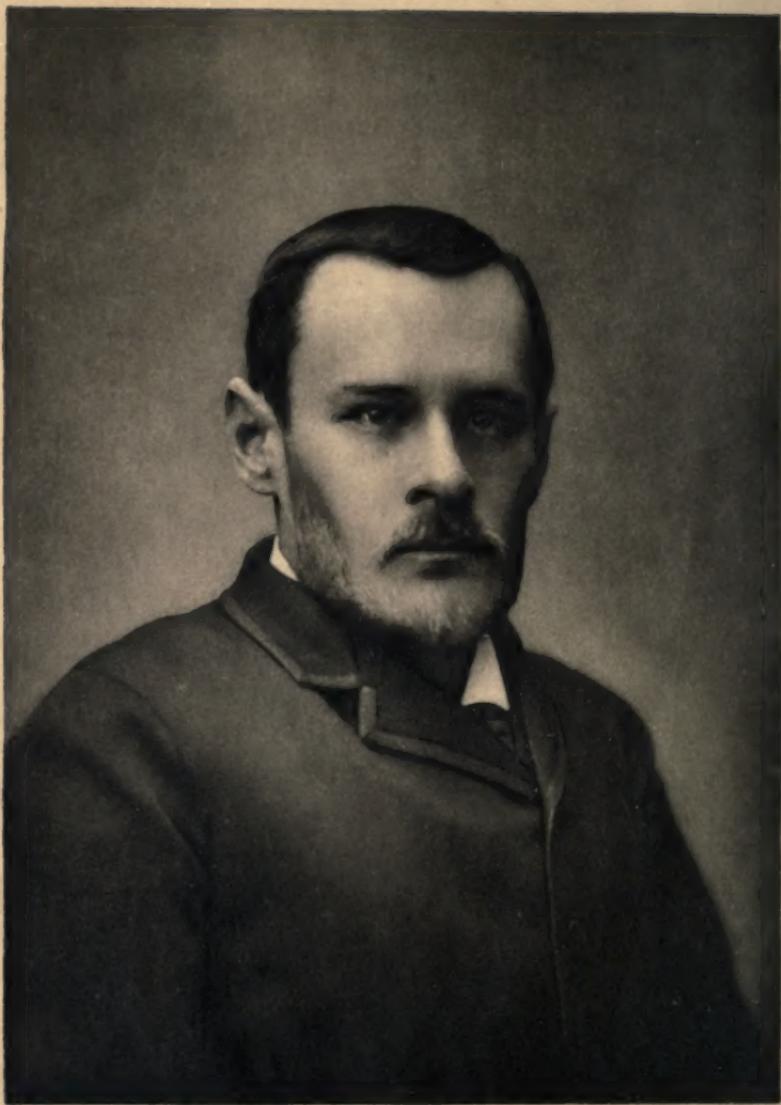


MASTERPIECES OF
FRENCH FICTION
Crowned by
The Académie Française
Known as
“THE IMMORTALS”





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



SERGE PANINE

(SERGE PANINE)

By GEORGES OHNET

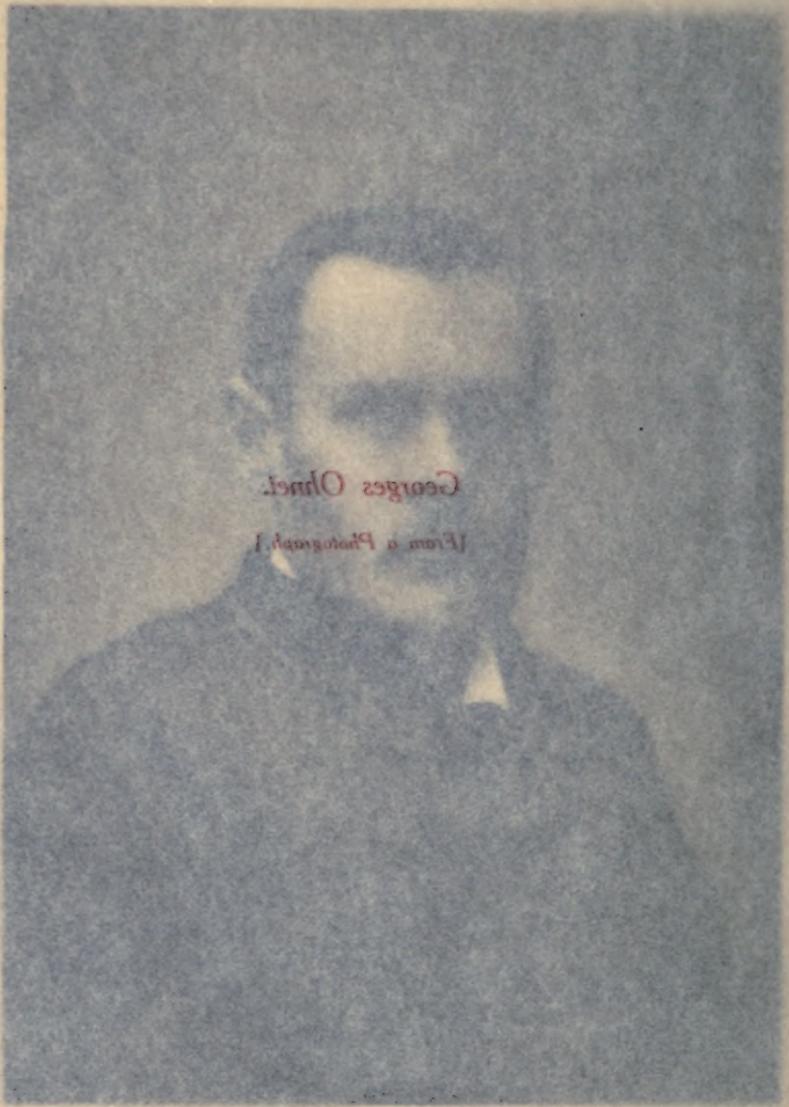
Crowned by the French Academy

With a General Introduction to the
Series by GASTON BOISSIER,
Secrétaire Perpetuel de l'Académie
Française, a [From a Photograph.]
by VICTOR CHERBULIEZ, of
the French Academy, and Illus-
trations by ADOLF LALAUZE.



NEW YORK

Current Literature Publishing Company
1908



George Ormsby

A man of popularity

SERGE PANINE

(*SERGE PANINE*)

By GEORGES OHNET

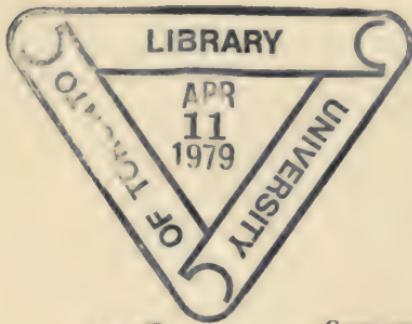
Crowned by the French Academy

With a General Introduction to the
Series by GASTON BOISSIER,
Secrétaire Perpetuel de l'Académie
Française, a Preface to the Novel
by VICTOR CHERBULIEZ, of
the French Academy, and Illus-
trations by ADOLF LALAUZE



NEW YORK

Current Literature Publishing Company
1908



COPYRIGHT, 1905

BY

ROBERT ARNOT

DQ
9378
02-43
1905



GENERAL INTRODUCTION



THE editor-in-chief of the *Maison Mazarin* — a man of letters who cherishes an enthusiastic yet discriminating love for the literary and artistic glories of France — formed within the last two years the great project of collecting and presenting to the vast numbers of intelligent readers of whom the New World boasts a series of those great and undying romances which, since 1784, have received the crown of merit awarded by the French Academy — that coveted assurance of immortality in letters and in art.

In the presentation of this serious enterprise for the criticism and official sanction of The Academy, *en séance*, was included a request that, if possible, the task of writing a preface to the series should be undertaken by me. Official sanction having been bestowed upon the plan, I, as the accredited officer of the French Academy, convey to you its hearty appreciation, endorsement, and sympathy with a project so nobly artistic. It is also my duty, privilege, and pleasure to point out, at the request of my brethren, the peculiar importance and lasting value of this series to all who would know the inner life of a people whose greatness no turns of fortune have been able to diminish.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the last hundred years France has experienced the most terrible vicissitudes, but, vanquished or victorious, triumphant or abased, never has she lost her peculiar gift of attracting the curiosity of the world. She interests every living being, and even those who do not love her desire to know her. To this peculiar attraction which radiates from her, artists and men of letters can well bear witness, since it is to literature and to the arts, before all, that France owes such living and lasting power. In every quarter of the civilized world there are distinguished writers, painters, and eminent musicians, but in France they exist in greater numbers than elsewhere. Moreover, it is universally conceded that French writers and artists have this particular and praiseworthy quality: they are most accessible to people of other countries. Without losing their national characteristics, they possess the happy gift of universality. To speak of letters alone: the books that Frenchmen write are read, translated, dramatized, and imitated everywhere; so it is not strange that these books give to foreigners a desire for a nearer and more intimate acquaintance with France.

Men preserve an almost innate habit of resorting to Paris from almost every quarter of the globe. For many years American visitors have been more numerous than others, although the journey from the United States is long and costly. But I am sure that when for the first time they see Paris—its palaces, its churches, its museums—and visit Versailles, Fontainebleau, and Chantilly, they do not regret the travail they have undergone. Meanwhile, however, I ask myself whether such sightseeing is all that, in coming hither, they wish to accomplish. Intelligent travellers—and, as a rule, it is the intelligent class that feels the need

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

of the educative influence of travel—look at our beautiful monuments, wander through the streets and squares among the crowds that fill them, and, observing them, I ask myself again: Do not such people desire to study at closer range these persons who elbow them as they pass; do they not wish to enter the houses of which they see but the façades; do they not wish to know how Parisians live and speak and act by their firesides? But time, alas! is lacking for the formation of those intimate friendships which would bring this knowledge within their grasp. French homes are rarely open to birds of passage, and visitors leave us with regret that they have not been able to see more than the surface of our civilization or to recognize by experience the note of our inner home life.

How, then, shall this void be filled? Speaking in the first person, the simplest means appears to be to study those whose profession it is to describe the society of the time, and primarily, therefore, the works of dramatic writers, who are supposed to draw a faithful picture of it. So we go to the theatre, and usually derive keen pleasure therefrom. But is pleasure all that we expect to find? What we should look for above everything in a comedy or a drama is a representation, exact as possible, of the manners and characters of the *dramatis personæ* of the play; and perhaps the conditions under which the play was written do not allow such representation. The exact and studied portrayal of a character demands from the author long preparation, and cannot be accomplished in a few hours. From the first scene to the last, each *rôle* must be posed in the author's mind exactly as it will be proved to be at the end. It is the author's aim and mission to place completely before his

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

audience the souls of the "agonists" laying bare the complications of motive, and throwing into relief the delicate shades of motive that sway them. Often, too, the play is produced before a numerous audience—an audience often *distract*, always pressed for time, and impatient of the least delay. Again, the public in general require that they shall be able to understand without difficulty, and at first thought, the characters the author seeks to present, making it necessary that these characters be depicted from their most salient sides—which are too often vulgar and unattractive.

In our comedies and dramas it is not the individual that is drawn, but the type. Where the individual alone is real, the type is a myth of the imagination—a pure invention. And invention is the mainspring of the theatre, which rests purely upon illusion, and does not please us unless it begins by deceiving us.

I believe, then, that if one seeks to know the world exactly as it is, the theatre does not furnish the means whereby one can pursue the study. A far better opportunity for knowing the private life of a people is available through the medium of its great novels. The novelist deals with each person as an individual. He speaks to his reader at an hour when the mind is disengaged from worldly affairs, and he can add without restraint every detail that seems needful to him to complete the rounding of his story. He can return at will, should he choose, to the source of the plot he is unfolding, in order that his reader may better understand him; he can emphasize and dwell upon those details which an audience in a theatre will not allow.

The reader, being at leisure, feels no impatience, for he knows that he can at any time lay down or take up the

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

book. It is the consciousness of this privilege that gives him patience, should he encounter a dull page here or there. He may hasten or delay his reading, according to the interest he takes in his romance—nay, more, he can return to the earlier pages, should he need to do so, for a better comprehension of some obscure point. In proportion as he is attracted and interested by the romance, and also in the degree of concentration with which he reads it, does he grasp better the subtleties of the narrative. No shade of character drawing escapes him. He realizes, with keener appreciation, the most delicate of human moods, and the novelist is not compelled to introduce the characters to him, one by one, distinguishing them only by the most general characteristics, but can describe each of those little individual idiosyncrasies that contribute to the sum total of a living personality.

When I add that the dramatic author is always to a certain extent a slave to the public, and must ever seek to please the passing taste of his time, it will be recognized that he is often, alas! compelled to sacrifice his artistic leanings to popular caprice—that is, if he has the natural desire that his generation should applaud him.

As a rule, with the theatre-going masses, one person follows the fads or fancies of others, and individual judgments are too apt to be irresistibly swayed by current opinion. But the novelist, entirely independent of his reader, is not compelled to conform himself to the opinion of any person, or to submit to his caprices. He is absolutely free to picture society as he sees it, and we therefore can have more confidence in his descriptions of the customs and characters of the day.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

It is precisely this view of the case that the editor of the series has taken, and herein is the *raison d'être* of this collection of great French romances. The choice was not easy to make. That form of literature called the romance abounds with us. France has always loved it, for French writers exhibit a curiosity—and I may say an indiscretion—that is almost charming in the study of customs and morals at large; a quality that induces them to talk freely of themselves and of their neighbors, and to set forth fearlessly both the good and the bad in human nature. In this fascinating phase of literature, France never has produced greater examples than of late years.

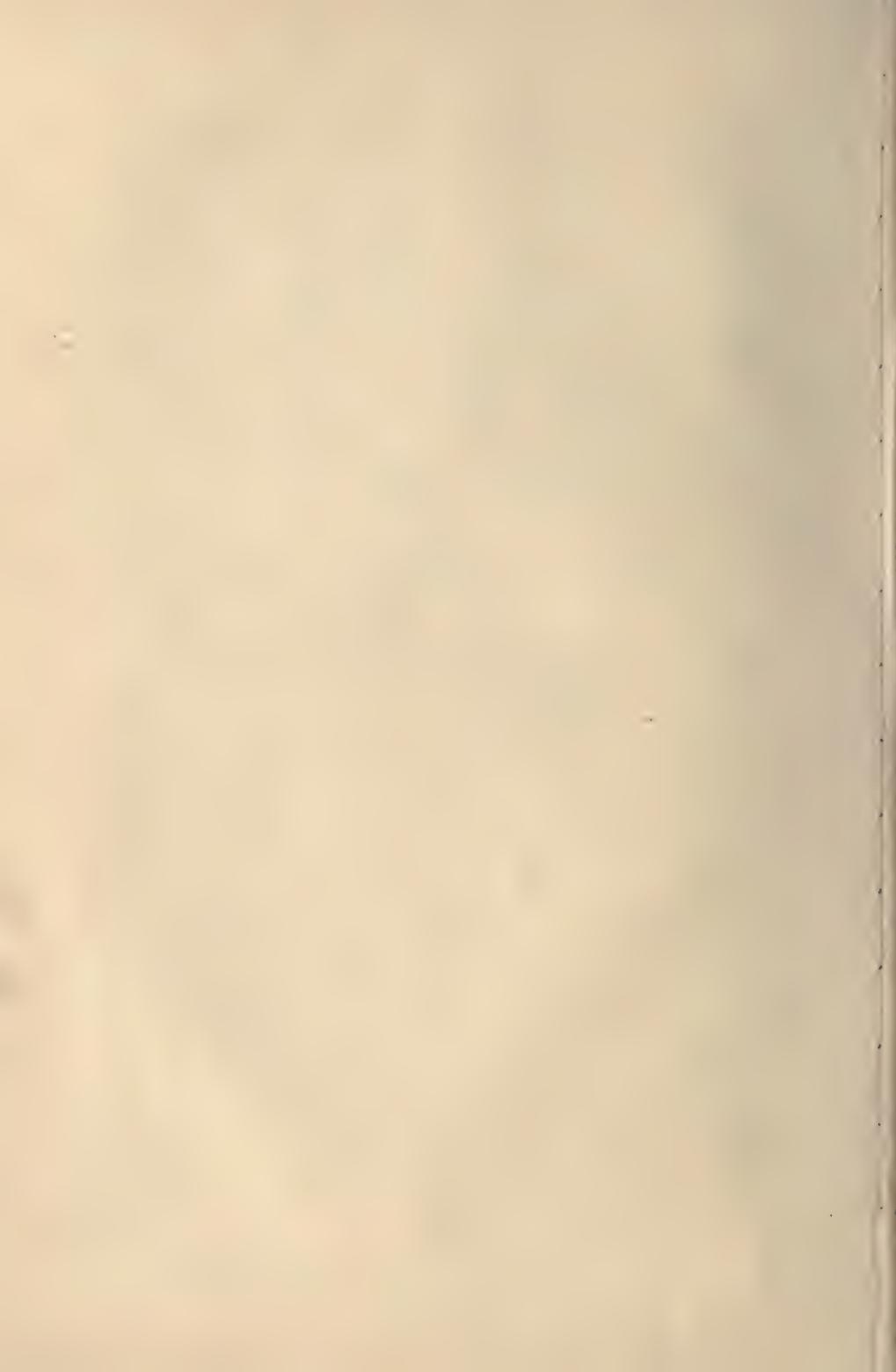
In the collection here presented to American readers will be found those works especially which reveal the intimate side of French social life—works in which are discussed the moral problems that affect most potently the life of the world at large. If inquiring spirits seek to learn the customs and manners of the France of any age, they must look for it among her crowned romances. They need go back no farther than Ludovic Halévy, who may be said to open the modern epoch. In the romantic school, on its historic side, Alfred de Vigny must be looked upon as supreme. De Musset and Anatole France may be taken as revealing authoritatively the moral philosophy of nineteenth-century thought. I must not omit to mention the *Jacqueline* of Th. Bentzon, and the “*Attic*” *Philosopher* of Emile Souvestre, nor the great names of Loti, Claretie, Coppée, Bazin, Bourget, Malot, Droz, De Massa, and last, but not least, our French Dickens, Alphonse Daudet. I need not add more; the very names of these “*Immortals*” suffice to commend the series to readers in all countries.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

One word in conclusion: America may rest assured that her students of international literature will find in this series of *ouvrages couronnés* all that they may wish to know of France at her own fireside—a knowledge that too often escapes them, knowledge that embraces not only a faithful picture of contemporary life in the French provinces, but a living and exact description of French society in modern times. They may feel certain that when they have read these romances, they will have sounded the depths and penetrated into the hidden intimacies of France, not only as she is, but as she would be known.

G. Boissier

SECRÉTAIRE PERPÉTUEL DE
L'ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE



GEORGES OHNET



HE only French novelist whose books have a circulation approaching the works of Daudet and of Zola is Georges Ohnet, a writer whose popularity is as interesting as his stories, because it explains, though it does not excuse, the contempt the Goncourts had for the favor of the great French public, and also because it shows how the highest form of Romanticism still ferments beneath the varnish of Naturalism in what is called genius among the great masses of readers.

Georges Ohnet was born in Paris, April 3, 1848, the son of an architect. He was destined for the Bar, but was early attracted by journalism and literature. Being a lawyer it was not difficult for him to join the editorial staff of *Le Pays*, and later *Le Constitutionnel*. This was soon after the Franco-German War. His romances, since collected under the title *Batailles de la Vie*, appeared first in *Le Figaro*, *L'Illustration*, and *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and have been exceedingly well received by the public. This relates also to his dramas, some of his works meeting with a popular success rarely extended to any author. For some time Georges Ohnet did not find the same favor with the critics, who often attacked him with a passionate violence and unusual

PREFACE

severity. True, a high philosophical flow of thoughts cannot be detected in his writings, but nevertheless it is certain that the characters and the subjects of which he treats are brilliantly sketched and clearly developed. They are likewise of perfect morality and honesty.

There was expected of him, however, an idea which was not quite realized. Appearing upon the literary stage at a period when Naturalism was triumphant, it was for a moment believed that he would restore Idealism in the manner of George Sand.

In any case the hostile critics have lost. For years public opinion has exalted him, and the reaction is the more significant when compared with the tremendous criticism launched against his early romances and novels.

A list of his works follows: *Serge Panine* (1881), crowned by the French Academy, has since gone through one hundred and fifty French editions; *Le Maître des Forges* (1882), a prodigious success, two hundred and fifty editions being printed (1900); *La Comtesse Sarah* (1882), *Lise Fleuron* (1884); *La Grande Marnière* (1886); *Les Dames de Croix-Mort* (1886); *Volonté* (1888); *Le Docteur Rameau* (1889); *Dernier Amour* (1889); *Le Curé de Favières* (1890); *Dette de Haine* (1891); *Nemrod et Cie.* (1892); *Le Lendemain des Amours* (1893); *Le Droit de l'Enfant* (1894); *Les Vieilles Rancunes* (1894); *La Dame en Gris* (1895); *La Fille du Député* (1896); *Le Roi de Paris* (1898); *Au Fond du Gouffre* (1899); *Gens de la Noce* (1900); *La Tenébreuse* (1900); *Le Crasseur d'Affaires* (1901); *Le Crépuscule* (1901); *Le Marché à l'Amour* (1902).

PREFACE

Ohnet's novels are collected under the titles, *Noir et Rose* (1887) and *L'Âme de Pierre* (1890).

The dramatic writings of Georges Ohnet, mostly taken from his novels, have greatly contributed to his reputation. *Le Maître des Forges* was played for a full year (Gymnase, 1883); it was followed by *Serge Panine* (1884); *La Comtesse Sarah* (1887). *La Grande Marinière* (1888), met also with a decided and prolonged success; *Dernier Amour* (Gymnase, 1890); *Colonel Roquebrune* (Porte St. Martin, 1897). Before that he had already written the plays *Regina Sarpi* (1875) and *Marthe* (1877), which yet hold a prominent place upon the French stage.

I have shown in this rapid sketch that a man of the stamp of Georges Ohnet must have immortal qualities in himself, even though flayed and roasted alive by the critics. He is most assuredly an artist in form, is endowed with a brilliant style, and has been named "L'Historiographe de la bourgeoisie contemporaine." Indeed, antagonism to plutocracy and hatred of aristocracy are the fundamental theses in almost every one of his books.

His exposition, I repeat, is startlingly neat, the development of his plots absolutely logical, and the world has acclaimed his ingenuity in dramatic construction. He is truly, *and in all senses*, of the Ages.

V. Cherbuliez
de l'Académie Française
[xv]



CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I	
THE HOUSE OF DESVARENNEs	I
CHAPTER II	
THE GALLEY-SLAVE OF PLEASURE	20
CHAPTER III	
PIERRE RETURNS	35
CHAPTER IV	
THE RIVALS	51
CHAPTER V	
A CRITICAL INTERVIEW	64
CHAPTER VI	
A SIGNIFICANT MEETING	74
CHAPTER VII	
JEANNE'S SECRET	90
CHAPTER VIII	
A PLEASANT UNDERSTANDING	102
CHAPTER IX	
THE DOUBLE MARRIAGE	116
CHAPTER X	
CAYROL'S DISAPPOINTMENT	134

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XI

	PAGE
CONFESSTION	145

CHAPTER XII

THE FÊTE	154
--------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIRST BREAK	161
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIV

A SUDDEN JOURNEY	183
----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XV

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER	200
-------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVI

THE TELLTALE KISS	215
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVII

CAYROL IS BLIND	227
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNIVERSAL CREDIT COMPANY	239
--	-----

CHAPTER XIX

SIN GROWS BOLDER	263
----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XX

THE CRISIS	281
----------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXI

"WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT"	289
----------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XXII

THE MOTHER'S REVENGE	303
--------------------------------	-----

ILLUSTRATIONS

	FACING PAGE
Georges Ohnet (<i>portrait</i>)	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"I have only my life to offer; accept it, Madame, it is yours."	102
"You consent, don't you, dear mother?" murmured Micheline	210

SERGE PANINE

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF DESVARENNES



HE firm of Desvarennes has been in an ancient mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique since 1875; it is one of the best known and most important in French industry. The counting-houses are in the wings of the building looking upon the courtyard, which were occupied by the servants when the family whose coat-of-arms has been effaced from above the gate-way were still owners of the estate. Madame Desvarennes inhabits the mansion which she has had magnificently renovated. A formidable rival of the Darblays, the great millers of France, the firm of Desvarennes is a commercial and political power. Inquire in Paris about its solvency, and you will be told that you may safely advance twenty millions of francs on the signature of the head of the firm. And this head is a woman.

This woman is remarkable. Gifted with keen understanding and a firm will, she had in former times vowed to make a large fortune, and she has kept her word.

GEORGES OHNET

She was the daughter of a humble packer of the Rue Neuve-Coquenard. Toward 1848 she married Michel Desvarennes, who was then a journeyman baker in a large shop in the Chaussée d'Antin. With the thousand francs which the packer managed to give his daughter by way of dowry, the young couple boldly took a shop and started a little bakery business. The husband kneaded and baked the bread, and the young wife, seated at the counter, kept watch over the till. Neither on Sundays nor on holidays was the shop shut.

Through the window, between two pyramids of pink and blue packets of biscuits, one could always catch sight of the serious-looking Madame Desvarennes, knitting woollen stockings for her husband while waiting for customers. With her prominent forehead, and her eyes always bent on her work, this woman appeared the living image of perseverance.

At the end of five years of incessant work, and possessing twenty thousand francs, saved sou by sou, the Desvarennes left the slopes of Montmartre, and moved to the centre of Paris. They were ambitious and full of confidence. They set up in the Rue Vivienne, in a shop resplendent with gilding and ornamented with looking-glasses. The ceiling was painted in panels with bright hued pictures that caught the eyes of the passers-by. The window-shelves were of white marble, and the counter, where Madame Desvarennes was still enthroned, was of a width worthy of the receipts that were taken every day. Business increased daily; the Desvarennes continued to be hard and systematic workers. The class of customers alone had changed; they

SERGE PANINE

were more numerous and richer. The house had a specialty for making small rolls for the restaurants. Michel had learned from the Viennese bakers how to make those golden balls which tempt the most rebellious appetite, and which, when in an artistically folded damask napkin, set off a dinner-table.

About this time Madame Desvarennes, while calculating how much the millers must gain on the flour they sell to the bakers, resolved, in order to lessen expenses, to do without middlemen and grind her own corn. Michel, naturally timid, was frightened when his wife disclosed to him the simple project which she had formed. Accustomed to submit to the will of her whom he respectfully called "the mistress," and of whom he was but the head clerk, he dared not oppose her. But, a red-tapist by nature, and hating innovations, owing to weakness of mind, he trembled inwardly and cried in agony: "Wife, you'll ruin us."

The mistress calmed the poor man's alarm; she tried to impart to him some of her confidence, to animate him with her hope, but without success, so she went on without him. A mill was for sale at Jouy, on the banks of the Oise; she paid ready money for it, and a few weeks later the bakery in the Rue Vivienne was independent of every one. She ground her own flour, and from that time business increased considerably. Feeling capable of carrying out large undertakings, and, moreover, desirous of giving up the meannesses of retail trade, Madame Desvarennes, one fine day, sent in a tender for supplying bread to the military hospitals. It was accepted, and from that time the house ranked

GEORGES OHNET

among the most important. On seeing the Desvarennes take their daring flight, the leading men in the trade had said:

"They have system and activity, and if they do not upset on the way, they will attain a high position."

But the mistress seemed to have the gift of divination. She worked surely—if she struck out one way you might be certain that success was there. In all her enterprises, "good luck" stood close by her; she scented failures from afar, and the firm never made a bad debt. Still Michel continued to tremble. The first mill had been followed by many more; then the old system appeared insufficient to Madame Desvarennes. As she wished to keep up with the increase of business she had steam-mills built, which are now grinding three hundred million francs' worth of corn every year.

Fortune had favored the house immensely, but Michel continued to tremble. From time to time when the mistress launched out a new business, he timidly ventured on his usual saying:

"Wife, you're going to ruin us."

But one felt it was only for form's sake, and that he himself no longer meant what he said. Madame Desvarennes received this plaintive remonstrance with a calm smile, and answered, maternally, as to a child:

"There, there, don't be frightened."

Then she would set to work again, and direct with irresistible vigor the army of clerks who peopled her counting-houses.

In fifteen years' time, by prodigious efforts of will and energy, Madame Desvarennes had made her way

SERGE PANINE

from the lonely and muddy Rue Neuve-Coquenard to the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique. Of the bakery there was no longer question. It was some time since the business in the Rue Vivienne had been transferred to the foreman of the shop. The flour trade alone occupied Madame Desvarennes's attention. She ruled the prices in the market; and great bankers came to her office and did business with her on a footing of equality. She did not become any prouder for it, she knew too well the strength and weakness of life to have pride; her former plain dealing had not stiffened into self-sufficiency. Such as one had known her when beginning business, such one found her in the zenith of her fortune. Instead of a woollen gown she wore a silk one, but the color was still black; her language had not become refined; she retained the same blunt familiar accent, and at the end of five minutes' conversation with any one of importance she could not resist calling him "my dear," to come morally near him. Her commands had more fulness. In giving her orders, she had the manner of a commander-in-chief, and it was useless to haggle when she had spoken. The best thing to do was to obey, as well and as promptly as possible.

Placed in a political sphere, this marvellously gifted woman would have been a Madame Roland; born to the throne, she would have been a Catherine II.; there was genius in her. Sprung from the lower ranks, her superiority had given her wealth; had she come from the higher, the great mind might have governed the world.

Still she was not happy; she had been married fifteen years, and her fireside was devoid of a cradle. During

GEORGES OHNET

the first years she had rejoiced at not having a child. Where could she have found time to occupy herself with a baby? Business engrossed her attention; she had no leisure to amuse herself with trifles. Maternity seemed to her a luxury for rich women; she had her fortune to make. In the struggle against the difficulties attending the enterprise she had begun, she had not had time to look around her and perceive that her home was lonely. She worked from morning till night. Her whole life was absorbed in this work, and when night came, overcome with fatigue, she fell asleep, her head filled with cares which stifled all tricks of the imagination.

Michel grieved, but in silence; his feeble and dependent nature missed a child. He, whose mind lacked occupation, thought of the future. He said to himself that the day when the dreamt-of fortune came would be more welcome if there were an heir to whom to leave it. What was the good of being rich, if the money went to collateral relatives? There was his nephew Savien, a disagreeable urchin whom he looked on with indifference; and he was biassed regarding his brother, who had all but failed several times in business, and to whose aid he had come to save the honor of the name. The mistress had not hesitated to help him, and had prevented the signature of "Desvarennes" being protested. She had not taunted him, having as large a heart as she had a mind. But Michel had felt humiliated to see his own folk make a gap in the financial edifice erected so laboriously by his wife. Out of this had gradually sprung a sense of dissatisfaction with the

SERGE PANINE

Desvarennnes of the other branch, which manifested itself by a marked coolness, when, by chance, his brother came to the house, accompanied by his son Savinien.

And then the paternity of his brother made him secretly jealous. Why should that incapable fellow, who succeeded in nothing, have a son? It was only those ne'er-do-well sort of people who were thus favored. He, Michel, already called the rich Desvarennnes, he had not a son. Was it just? But where is there justice in this world?

The first time that she saw him with a downcast face the mistress had questioned him, and he had frankly expressed his regrets. But he had been so repelled by his wife, in whose heart a great trouble, steadily repressed, however, had been produced, that he never dared to recur to the subject.

He suffered in silence. But he no longer suffered alone. Like an overflowing river that finds an outlet in the valley, which it inundates, the longings for maternity, hitherto repressed by the preoccupations of business, had suddenly seized Madame Desvarennnes.

Strong and unyielding, she struggled and would not own herself conquered. Still she became sad. Her voice sounded less sonorously in the offices where she gave an order; her energetic nature seemed subdued. Now she looked around her. She beheld prosperity made stable by incessant work, respect gained by spotless honesty; she had attained the goal which she had marked out in her ambitious dreams, as being paradise itself. Paradise was there; but it lacked the angel. They had no child.

GEORGES OHNET

From that day a change came over this woman, slowly but surely; scarcely perceptible to strangers, but easy to be seen by those around her. She became benevolent, and gave away considerable sums of money, especially to children's "Homes." But when the good people who governed these establishments, lured on by her generosity, came to ask her to be on their committee of management, she became angry, asking them if they were joking with her? What interest could those brats have for her? She had other fish to fry. She gave them what they needed, and what more could they want? The fact was she felt weak and troubled before children. But within her a powerful and unknown voice had arisen, and the hour was not far distant when the bitter wave of her regrets was to overflow and be made manifest.

She did not like Savinien, her nephew, and kept all her sweetness for the son of one of their old neighbors in the Rue Neuve-Coquenard, a small haberdasher, who had not been able to get on, but continued humbly to sell thread and needles to the thrifty folks of the neighborhood. The haberdasher, Mother Delarue, as she was called, had remained a widow after one year of married life. Pierre, her boy, had grown up under the shadow of the bakery, the cradle of the Desvarennes's fortunes.

On Sundays the mistress would give him a gingerbread or a cracknel, and amuse herself with his baby prattle. She did not lose sight of him when she removed to the Rue Vivienne. Pierre had entered the elementary school of the neighborhood, and by his precocious intelligence and exceptional application, had

SERGE PANINE

not been long in getting to the top of his class. The boy had left school after gaining an exhibition admitting him to the Chaptal College. This hard worker, who was in a fair way of making his own position without costing his relatives anything, greatly interested Madame Desvarennes. She found in this plucky nature a striking analogy to herself. She formed projects for Pierre's future; in fancy she saw him enter the Polytechnic school, and leave it with honors. The young man had the choice of becoming a mining or civil engineer, and of entering the government service.

He was hesitating what to do when the mistress came and offered him a situation in her firm as junior partner; it was a golden bridge that she placed before him. With his exceptional capacities he was not long in giving to the house a new impulse. He perfected the machinery, and triumphantly defied all competition. All this was a happy dream in which Pierre was to her a real son; her home became his, and she monopolized him completely. But suddenly a shadow came o'er the spirit of her dreams. Pierre's mother, the little haberdasher, proud of her son, would she consent to give him up to a stranger? Oh! if Pierre had only been an orphan! But one could not rob a mother of her son! And Madame Desvarennes stopped the flight of her imagination. She followed Pierre with anxious looks; but she forbade herself to dispose of the youth: he did not belong to her.

This woman, at the age of thirty-five, still young in heart, was disturbed by feelings which she strove, but vainly, to rule. She hid them especially from her hus-

GEORGES OHNET

band, whose repining chattering she feared. If she had once shown him her weakness he would have overwhelmed her daily with the burden of his regrets. But an unforeseen circumstance placed her at Michel's mercy.

Winter had come, bringing December and its snow. The weather this year was exceptionally inclement, and traffic in the streets was so difficult, business was almost suspended. The mistress left her deserted offices and retired early to her private apartments. The husband and wife spent their evenings alone. They sat there, facing each other, at the fireside. A shade concentrated the light of the lamp upon the table covered with expensive knick-knacks. The ceiling was sometimes vaguely lighted up by a glimmer from the stove which glittered on the gilt cornices. Ensconced in deep comfortable armchairs, the pair respectively caressed their favorite dream without speaking of it.

Madame Desvarennes saw beside her a little pink-and-white baby girl, toddling on the carpet. She heard her words, understood her language, untranslatable to all others than a mother. Then bedtime came. The child, with heavy eyelids, let her little fair-haired head fall on her shoulders. Madame Desvarennes took her in her arms and undressed her quietly, kissing her bare and dimpled arms. It was exquisite enjoyment which stirred her heart deliciously. She saw the cradle, and devoured the child with her eyes. She knew that the picture was a myth. But what did it matter to her? She was happy. Michel's voice broke on her reverie.

"Wife," said he, "this is Christmas Eve; and as

SERGE PANINE

there are only us two, suppose you put your slipper on the hearth."

Madame Desvarennes rose. Her eyes vaguely turned toward the hearth on which the fire was dying, and beside the upright of the large sculptured mantelpiece she beheld for a moment a tiny shoe, belonging to the child which she loved to see in her dreams. Then the vision vanished, and there was nothing left but the lonely hearth. A sharp pain tore her swollen heart; a sob rose to her lips, and, slowly, two tears rolled down her cheeks. Michel, quite pale, looked at her in silence; he held out his hand to her, and said, in a trembling voice:

"You were thinking about it, eh?"

Madame Desvarennes bowed her head, twice, silently, and without adding another word, the pair fell into each other's arms and wept.

From that day they hid nothing from each other, and shared their troubles and regrets in common. The mistress unburdened her heart by making a full confession, and Michel, for the first time in his life, learned the depth of soul of his companion to its inmost recesses. This woman, so energetic, so obstinate, was, as it were, broken down. The springs of her will seemed worn out. She felt despondencies and wearinesses until then unknown. Work tired her. She did not venture down to the offices; she talked of giving up business, which was a bad sign. She longed for country air. Were they not rich enough? With their simple tastes so much money was unnecessary. In fact, they had no wants. They would go to some pretty estate in the suburbs of

GEORGES OHNET

Paris, live there and plant cabbages. Why work? they had no children.

Michel agreed to these schemes. For a long time he had wished for repose. Often he had feared that his wife's ambition would lead them too far. But now, since she stopped of her own accord, it was all for the best.

At this juncture their solicitor informed them that, near to their works, the Cernay estate was to be put up for sale. Very often, when going from Jouy to the mills, Madame Desvarennes had noticed the château, the slate roofs of the turrets of which rose gracefully from a mass of deep verdure. The Count de Cernay, the last representative of a noble race, had just died of consumption, brought on by reckless living, leaving nothing behind him but debts and a little girl two years old. Her mother, an Italian singer and his mistress, had left him one morning without troubling herself about the child. Everything was to be sold, by order of the Court.

Some most lamentable incidents had saddened the Count's last hours. The bailiffs had entered the house with the doctor when he came to pay his last call, and the notices of the sale were all but posted up before the funeral was over. Jeanne, the orphan, scared amid the troubles of this wretched end, seeing unknown men walking into the reception-rooms with their hats on, hearing strangers speaking loudly and with arrogance, had taken refuge in the laundry. It was there that Madame Desvarennes found her, playing, plainly dressed in a little alpaca frock, her pretty hair loose and

SERGE PANINE

falling on her shoulders. She looked astonished at what she had seen; silent, not daring to run or sing as formerly in the great desolate house whence the master had just been taken away forever.

With the vague instinct of abandoned children who seek to attach themselves to some one or some thing, Jeanne clung to Madame Desvarennes, who, ready to protect, and longing for maternity, took the child in her arms. The gardener's wife acted as guide during her visit over the property. Madame Desvarennes questioned her. She knew nothing of the child except what she had heard from the servants when they gossiped in the evenings about their late master. They said Jeanne was a bastard. Of her relatives they knew nothing. The Count had an aunt in England who was married to a rich lord; but he had not corresponded with her lately. The little one then was reduced to beggary as the estate was to be sold.

The gardener's wife was a good woman and was willing to keep the child until the new proprietor came; but when once affairs were settled, she would certainly go and make a declaration to the mayor, and take her to the workhouse. Madame Desvarennes listened in silence. One word only had struck her while the woman was speaking. The child was without support, without ties, and abandoned like a poor lost dog. The little one was pretty too; and when she fixed her large deep eyes on that improvised mother, who pressed her so tenderly to her heart, she seemed to implore her not to put her down, and to carry her away from the mourning that troubled her mind and the isolation that froze her heart.

GEORGES OHNET

Madame Desvarennes, very superstitious, like a woman of the people, began to think that, perhaps, Providence had brought her to Cernay that day and had placed the child in her path. It was perhaps a reparation which heaven granted her, in giving her the little girl she so longed for. Acting unhesitatingly, as she did in everything, she left her name with the woman, carried Jeanne to her carriage, and took her to Paris, promising herself to make inquiries to find her relatives.

A month later, the property of Cernay pleasing her, and the researches for Jeanne's friends not proving successful, Madame Desvarennes took possession of the estate and the child into the bargain.

Michel welcomed the child without enthusiasm. The little stranger was indifferent to him; he would have preferred adopting a boy. The mistress was delighted. Her maternal instincts, so long stifled, developed fully. She made plans for the future. Her energy returned; she spoke loudly and firmly. But in her appearance there was revealed an inward contentment never remarked before, which made her sweeter and more benevolent. She no longer spoke of retiring from business. The discouragement which had seized her left her as if by magic. The house which had been so dull for some months became noisy and gay. The child, like a sunbeam, had scattered the clouds.

It was then that the most unlooked-for phenomenon, which was so considerably to influence Madame Desvarennes's life, occurred. At the moment when the mistress seemed provided by chance with the heiress so much longed for, she learned with surprise that she was

SERGE PANINE

about to become a mother! After sixteen years of married life, this discovery was almost a discomfiture. What would have been delight formerly was now a cause for fear. She, almost an old woman!

There was an incredible commotion in the business world when the news became known. The younger branch of Desvarennés had witnessed Jeanne's arrival with little satisfaction, and were still more gloomy when they learned that the chances of their succeeding to great wealth were over. Still they did not lose all hopes. At thirty-five years of age one cannot always tell how these little affairs will come off. An accident was possible. But none occurred; all passed off well.

Madame Desvarennés was as strong physically as she was morally, and proved victorious by bringing into the world a little girl, who was named Micheline in honor of her father. The mistress's heart was large enough to hold two children; she kept the orphan she had adopted, and brought her up as if she had been her very own. Still there was soon an enormous difference in her manner of loving Jeanne and Micheline. This mother had for the long-wished-for child an ardent, mad, passionate love like that of a tigress for her cubs. She had never loved her husband. All the tenderness which had accumulated in her heart blossomed, and it was like spring.

This autocrat, who had never allowed contradiction, and before whom all her dependents bowed either with or against the grain, was now led in her turn; the bronze of her character became like wax in the little pink hands of her daughter. The commanding woman

GEORGES OHNET

bent before the little fair head. There was nothing good enough for Micheline. Had the mother owned the world she would have placed it at the little one's feet. One tear from the child upset her. If on one of the most important subjects Madame Desvarennes had said "No," and Micheline came and said "Yes," the hitherto resolute will became subordinate to the caprice of a child. They knew it in the house and acted upon it. This manœuvre succeeded each time, although Madame Desvarennes had seen through it from the first. It appeared as if the mother felt a secret joy in proving under all circumstances the unbounded adoration which she felt for her daughter. She often said:

"Pretty as she is, and rich as I shall make her, what husband will be worthy of Micheline? But if she believes me when it is time to choose one, she will prefer a man remarkable for his intelligence, and will give him her fortune as a stepping-stone to raise him as high as she chooses him to go."

Inwardly she was thinking of Pierre Delarue, who had just taken honors at the Polytechnic school, and who seemed to have a brilliant career before him. This woman, humbly born, was proud of her origin, and sought a plebeian for her son-in-law, to put into his hand a golden tool powerful enough to move the world.

Micheline was ten years old when her father died. Alas, Michel was not a great loss. They wore mourning for him; but they hardly noticed that he was absent. His whole life had been a void. Madame Desvarennes, it is sad to say, felt herself more mistress of her child when she was a widow. She was jealous of Micheline's

SERGE PANINE

affections, and each kiss the child gave her father seemed to the mother to be robbed from her. With this fierce tenderness, she preferred solitude around this beloved being.

At this time Madame Desvarennes was really in the zenith of womanly splendor. She seemed taller, her figure had straightened, vigorous and powerful. Her gray hair gave her face a majestic appearance. Always surrounded by a court of clients and friends, she seemed like a sovereign. The fortune of the firm was not to be computed. It was said Madame Desvarennes did not know how rich she was.

Jeanne and Micheline grew up amid this colossal prosperity. The one, tall, brown-haired, with blue eyes changing like the sea; the other, fragile, fair, with dark dreamy eyes. Jeanne, proud, capricious, and inconstant; Micheline, simple, sweet, and tenacious. The brunette inherited from her reckless father and her fanciful mother a violent and passionate nature; the blonde was tractable and good like Michel, but resolute and firm like Madame Desvarennes. These two opposite natures were congenial, Micheline sincerely loving Jeanne, and Jeanne feeling the necessity of living amicably with Micheline, her mother's idol, but inwardly enduring with difficulty the inequalities which began to exhibit themselves in the manner with which the intimates of the house treated the one and the other. She found these flatteries wounding, and thought Madame Desvarennes's preferences for Micheline unjust.

All these accumulated grievances made Jeanne con-

GEORGES OHNET

ceive the wish one morning of leaving the house where she had been brought up, and where she now felt humiliated. Pretending to long to go to England to see that rich relative of her father, who, knowing her to be in a brilliant society, had taken notice of her, she asked Madame Desvarennes to allow her to spend a few weeks from home. She wished to try the ground in England, and see what she might expect in the future from her family. Madame Desvarennes lent herself to this whim, not guessing the young girl's real motive; and Jeanne, well attended, went to her aunt's home in England.

Madame Desvarennes, besides, had attained the summit of her hopes, and an event had just taken place which preoccupied her. Micheline, deferring to her mother's wishes, had decided to allow herself to be betrothed to Pierre Delarue, who had just lost his mother, and whose business improved daily. The young girl, accustomed to treat Pierre like a brother, had easily consented to accept him as her future husband.

Jeanne, who had been away for six months, had returned sobered and disillusioned about her family. She had found them kind and affable, had received many compliments on her beauty, which was really remarkable, but had not met with any encouragement in her desires for independence. She came home resolved not to leave until she married. She arrived in the Rue Saint-Dominique at the moment when Pierre Delarue, thirsting with ambition, was leaving his betrothed, his relatives, and gay Paris to undertake engineering work on the coasts of Algeria and Tunis that would raise

SERGE PANINE

him above his rivals. In leaving, the young man did not for a moment think that Jeanne was returning from England at the same hour with trouble for him in the person of a very handsome cavalier, Prince Serge Panine, who had been introduced to her at a ball during the London season. Mademoiselle de Cernay, availing herself of English liberty, was returning escorted only by a maid in company with the Prince. The journey had been delightful. The tête-à-tête travelling had pleased the young people, and on leaving the train they had promised to see each other again. Official balls facilitated their meeting; Serge was introduced to Madame Desvarennes as being an English friend, and soon became the most assiduous partner of Jeanne and Micheline. It was thus, under the most trivial pretext, that the man gained admittance to the house where he was to play such an important part.

CHAPTER II

THE GALLEY-SLAVE OF PLEASURE



NE morning in the month of May, 1879, a young man, elegantly attired, alighted from a well-appointed carriage before the door of Madame Desvarenn's house. The young man passed quickly before the porter in uniform, decorated with a military medal, stationed near the door. The visitor found himself in an anteroom which communicated with several corridors. A messenger was seated in the depth of a large armchair, reading the newspaper, and not even lending an inattentive ear to the whispered conversation of a dozen canvassers, who were patiently awaiting their turn for gaining a hearing. On seeing the young man enter by the private door, the messenger rose, dropped his newspaper on the armchair, hastily raised his velvet skullcap, tried to smile, and made two steps forward.

"Good-morning, old Félix," said the young man, in a friendly tone to the messenger. "Is my aunt within?"

"Yes, Monsieur Savinien, Madame Desvarenn is in her office; but she has been engaged for more than an hour with the Financial Secretary of the War Department."

SERGE PANINE

In uttering these words old Félix put on a mysterious and important air, which denoted how serious the discussions going on in the adjoining room seemed to his mind.

"You see," continued he, showing Madame Desvarennes's nephew the anteroom full of people, "madame has kept all these waiting since this morning, and perhaps she won't see them."

"I must see her though," murmured the young man.

He reflected a moment, then added:

"Is Monsieur Maréchal in?"

"Yes, sir, certainly. If you will allow me I will announce you."

"It is unnecessary."

And, stepping forward, he entered the office adjoining that of Madame Desvarennes.

Seated at a large table of black wood, covered with bundles of papers and notes, a young man was working. He was thirty years of age, but appeared much older. His prematurely bald forehead, and wrinkled brow, betokened a life of severe struggles and privations, or a life of excesses and pleasures. Still those clear and pure eyes were not those of a libertine, and the straight nose solidly joined to the face was that of a searcher. Whatever the cause, the man was old before his time.

On hearing the door of his office open, he raised his eyes, put down his pen, and was making a movement toward his visitor, when the latter interrupted him quickly with these words:

"Don't stir, Maréchal, or I shall be off! I only came in until Aunt Desvarennes is at liberty; but if I disturb

GEORGES OHNET

you I will go and take a turn, smoke a cigar, and come back in three quarters of an hour."

"You do not disturb me, Monsieur Savinien; at least not often enough, for be it said, without reproaching you, it is more than three months since we have seen anything of you. There, the post is finished. I was writing the last addresses."

And taking a heavy bundle of papers off the desk, Maréchal showed them to Savinien.

"Gracious! It seems that business is going on well here."

"Better and better."

"You are making mountains of flour."

"Yes; high as Mont Blanc; and then, we now have a fleet."

"What! a fleet?" cried Savinien, whose face expressed doubt and surprise at the same time.

"Yes, a steam fleet. Last year Madame Desvarennnes was not satisfied with the state in which her corn came from the East. The corn was damaged owing to defective stowage; the firm claimed compensation from the steamship company. The claim was only moderately satisfied, Madame Desvarennnes got vexed, and now we import our own. We have branches at Smyrna and Odessa."

"It is fabulous! If it goes on, my aunt will have an administration as important as that of a European state. Oh! you are happy here, you people; you are busy. I amuse myself! And if you knew how it wearies me! I am withering, consuming myself, I am longing for business."

SERGE PANINE

And saying these words, young Monsieur Desvarennnes allowed a sorrowful moan to escape him.

"It seems to me," said Maréchal, "that it only depends upon yourself to do as much and more business than any one?"

"You know well enough that it is not so," sighed Savinien; "my aunt is opposed to it."

"What a mistake!" cried Maréchal, quickly. "I have heard Madame Desvarennnes say more than twenty times how she regretted your being unemployed. Come into the firm, you will have a good berth in the counting-house."

"In the counting-house!" cried Savinien, bitterly; "there's the sore point. Now look here, my friend, do you think that an organization like mine is made to bend to the trivialities of a copying clerk's work? To follow the humdrum of every-day routine? To blacken paper? To become a servant?—me! with what I have in my brain?"

And, rising abruptly, Savinien began to walk hurriedly up and down the room, disdainfully shaking his little head with its low forehead on which were plastered a few fair curls (made with curling-irons), with the indignant air of an Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders.

"Oh, I know very well what is at the bottom of the business—my aunt is jealous of me because I am a man of ideas. She wishes to be the only one of the family who possesses any. She thinks of binding me down to a besotting work," continued he, "but I won't have it. I know what I want! It is independence of thought,

GEORGES OHNET

bent on the solution of great problems—that is, a wide field to apply my discoveries. But a fixed rule, common law, I could not submit to it."

"It is like the examinations," observed Maréchal, looking slyly at young Desvarennes, who was drawing himself up to his full height; "examinations never suited you."

"Never," said Savinien, energetically. "They wished to get me into the Polytechnic School; impossible! Then the Central School; no better. I astonished the examiners by the novelty of my ideas. They refused me."

"Well, you know," retorted Maréchal, "if you began by overthrowing their theories——"

"That's it!" cried Savinien, triumphantly. "My mind is stronger than I; I must let my imagination have free run, and no one will ever know what that particular turn of mind has cost me. Even my family do not think me serious. Aunt Desvarennes has forbidden any kind of enterprise, under pretence that I bear her name, and that I might compromise it because I have twice failed. My aunt paid, it is true. Do you think it is generous of her to take advantage of my situation, and prohibit my trying to succeed? Are inventors judged by three or four failures? If my aunt had allowed me I should have astonished the world."

"She feared, above all," said Maréchal, simply, "to see you astonishing the Tribunal of Commerce."

"Oh! you, too," moaned Savinien, "are in league with my enemies; you make no account of me."

And young Desvarennes sank as if crushed into an armchair and began to lament. He was very unhappy

SERGE PANINE

at being misunderstood. His aunt allowed him three thousand francs a month on condition that he would not make use of his ten fingers. Was it moral? Then he with such exuberant vigor had to waste it on pleasure and seeing life to the utmost. He passed his time in theatres, at clubs, restaurants, in boudoirs. He lost his time, his money, his hair, his illusions. He moaned his lot, but continued, only to have something to do. With grim sarcasm he called himself the galley-slave of pleasure. And notwithstanding all these consuming excesses, he asserted that he could not render his imagination barren. Amid the greatest follies—at suppers, during the clinking of glasses, in the excitement of the dance—inspirations came to him in flashes, he made prodigious discoveries.

And as Maréchal ventured a timid “Oh!” tinged with incredulity, Savinien flew into a passion. Yes; he had invented something astonishing; he saw fortune within reach, and he thought the bargain made with his aunt very unjust. Therefore he had come to break it, and to regain his liberty.

Maréchal looked at the young man while he was explaining with animation his ambitious projects. He scrutinized that flat forehead within which the dandy asserted so many good ideas were hidden. He measured that slim form bent by wild living, and asked himself how that degenerate being could struggle against the difficulties of business. A smile played on his lips. He knew Savinien too well not to be aware that he was a prey to one of those attacks of melancholy which seized on him when his funds were low.

GEORGES OHNET

On these occasions, which occurred frequently, the young man had longings for business, which Madame Desvarennes stopped by asking: "How much?" Savinien allowed himself to be with difficulty induced to consent to renounce the certain profits promised, as he said, by his projected enterprise. At last he would capitulate, and with his pocket well lined, nimble and joyful, he returned to his boudoirs, race-courses, fashionable restaurants, and became more than ever the galley-slave of pleasure.

"And Pierre?" asked young Desvarennes, suddenly and quickly changing the subject. "Have you any news of him?"

Maréchal became serious. A cloud seemed to have come across his brow; he gravely answered Savinien's question.

Pierre was still in the East. He was travelling toward Tunis, the coast of which he was exploring. It was a question of the formation of an island sea by taking the water through the desert. It would be a colossal undertaking, the results of which would be considerable as regarded Algeria. The climate would be completely changed, and the value of the colony would be increased tenfold, because it would become the most fertile country in the world. Pierre had been occupied in this undertaking for more than a year with unequalled ardor; he was far from his home, his betrothed, seeing only the goal to be attained; turning a deaf ear to all that would distract his attention from the great work, to the success of which he hoped to contribute gloriously.

"And don't people say," resumed Savinien with an

SERGE PANINE

evil smile, "that during his absence a dashing young fellow is busy luring his betrothed away from him?"

At these words Maréchal made a quick movement.

"It is false," he interrupted; "and I do not understand how you, Monsieur Desvarennes, should be the bearer of such a tale. To admit that Mademoiselle Micheline could break her word or her engagements is to slander her, and if any one other than you——"

"There, there, my dear friend," said Savinien, laughing, "don't get into a rage. What I say to you I would not repeat to the first comer; besides, I am only the echo of a rumor that has been going the round during the last three weeks. They even give the name of him who has been chosen for the honor and pleasure of such a brilliant conquest. I mean Prince Serge Panine."

"As you have mentioned Prince Panine," replied Maréchal, "allow me to tell you that he has not put his foot inside Madame Desvarennes's door for three weeks. This is not the way of a man about to marry the daughter of the house."

"My dear fellow, I only repeat what I have heard. As for me, I don't know any more. I have kept out of the way for more than three months. And besides, it matters little to me whether Micheline be a commoner or a princess, the wife of Delarue or of Panine. I shall be none the richer or the poorer, shall I? Therefore I need not care. The dear child will certainly have millions enough to marry easily. And her adopted sister, the stately Mademoiselle Jeanne, what has become of her?"

GEORGES OHNET

"Ah! as to Mademoiselle de Cernay, that is another affair," cried Maréchal.

And as if wishing to divert the conversation in an opposite direction to which Savinien had led it a moment before, he spoke readily of Madame Desvarennes's adopted daughter. She had made a lively impression on one of the intimate friends of the house—the banker Cayrol, who had offered his name and his fortune to the fair Jeanne.

This was a cause of deep amazement to Savinien. What! Cayrol! The shrewd close-fisted Auvergnat! A girl without a fortune! Cayrol Silex as he was called in the commercial world on account of his hardness. This living money-bag had a heart then! It was necessary to believe it since both money-bag and heart had been placed at Mademoiselle de Cernay's feet. This strange girl was certainly destined to millions. She had just missed being Madame Desvarennes's heiress, and now Cayrol had taken it into his head to marry her.

But that was not all. And when Maréchal told Savinien that the fair Jeanne flatly refused to become the wife of Cayrol, there was an outburst of joyful exclamations. She refused! By Jove, she was mad! An unlooked-for marriage—for she had not a penny, and had most extravagant notions. She had been brought up as if she were to live always in velvet and silks—to loll in carriages and think only of her pleasure. What reason did she give for refusing him! None. Haughtily and disdainfully she had declared that she did not love "that man," and that she would not marry him.

When Savinien heard these details his rapture in-

SERGE PANINE

creased. One thing especially charmed him: Jeanne's saying "that man," when speaking of Cayrol. A little girl who was called "De Cernay" just as he might call himself "Des Batignolles" if he pleased: the natural and unacknowledged daughter of a Count and of a shady public singer! And she refused Cayrol, calling him "that man." It was really funny. And what did worthy Cayrol say about it?

When Maréchal declared that the banker had not been damped by this discouraging reception, Savinien said it was human nature. The fair Jeanne scorned Cayrol and Cayrol adored her. He had often seen those things happen. He knew the baggages so well! Nobody knew more of women than he did. He had known some more difficult to manage than proud Mademoiselle Jeanne.

An old leaven of hatred had festered in Savinien's heart against Jeanne since the time when the younger branch of the Desvarennes had reason to fear that the superb heritage was going to the adopted daughter. Savinien had lost the fear, but had kept up the animosity. And everything that could happen to Jeanne of a vexing or painful nature would be witnessed by him with pleasure.

He was about to encourage Maréchal to continue his revelations, and had risen and was leaning on the desk. With his face excited and eager, he was preparing his question, when, through the door which led to Madame Desvarennes's office, a confused murmur of voices was heard. At the same time the door was half opened, held by a woman's hand, square, with short fingers, a

GEORGES OHNET

firm-willed and energetic hand. At the same time, the last words exchanged between Madame Desvarennnes and the Financial Secretary of the War Office were distinctly audible. Madame Desvarennnes was speaking, and her voice sounded clear and plain; a little raised and vibrating. There seemed a shade of anger in its tone.

"My dear sir, you will tell the Minister that does not suit me. It is not the custom of the house. For thirty-five years I have conducted business thus, and I have always found it answer. I wish you good-morning."

The door of the office facing that which Madame Desvarennnes held closed, and a light step glided along the corridor. It was the Financial Secretary's. The mistress appeared.

Maréchal rose hastily. As to Savinien, all his resolution seemed to have vanished at the sound of his aunt's voice, for he had rapidly gained a corner of the room, and seated himself on a leather-covered sofa, hidden behind an armchair, where he remained perfectly quiet.

"Do you understand that, Maréchal?" said Madame Desvarennnes; "they want to place a resident agent at the mill on pretext of checking things. They say that all military contractors are obliged to submit to it. My word, do they take us for thieves, the rascals? It is the first time that people have seemed to doubt me. And it has enraged me. I have been arguing for a whole hour with the man they sent me. I said to him, 'My dear sir, you may either take it or leave it. Let us start from this point: I can do without you and you cannot do without me. If you don't buy my flour, somebody

SERGE PANINE

else will. I am not at all troubled about it. But as to having any one here who would be as much master as myself, or perhaps more, never! I am too old to change my customs.' Thereupon the Financial Secretary left. There! And, besides, they change their Ministry every fortnight. One would never know with whom one had to deal. Thank you, no."

While talking thus with Maréchal, Madame Desvarennes was walking about the office. She was still the same woman with the broad prominent forehead. Her hair, which she wore in smooth plaits, had become gray, but the sparkle of her dark eyes only seemed the brighter from this. She had preserved her splendid teeth, and her smile had remained young and charming. She spoke with animation, as usual, and with the gestures of a man. She placed herself before her secretary, seeming to appeal to him as a witness of her being in the right. During the hour with the official personage she had been obliged to contain herself. She unburdened herself to Maréchal, saying just what she thought.

But all at once she perceived Savinien, who was waiting to show himself now that she had finished. The mistress turned sharply to the young man, and frowned slightly:

"Hallo! you are there, eh? How is it that you could leave your fair friends?"

"But, aunt, I came to pay you my respects."

"No nonsense now; I've no time," interrupted the mistress. "What do you want?"

Savinien, disconcerted by this rude reception, blinked

GEORGES OHNET

his eyes, as if seeking some form to give his request; then, making up his mind, he said:

“I came to see you on business.”

“You on business?” replied Madame Desvarennes, with a shade of astonishment and irony.

“Yes, aunt, on business,” declared Savinien, looking down as if he expected a rebuff.

“Oh, oh, oh!” said Madame Desvarennes, “you know our agreement; I give you an allowance——”

“I renounce my income,” interrupted Savinien, quickly, “I wish to take back my independence. The transfer I made has already cost me too dear. It’s a fool’s bargain. The enterprise which I am going to launch is superb, and must realize immense profits. I shall certainly not abandon it.”

While speaking, Savinien had become animated and had regained his self-possession. He believed in his scheme, and was ready to pledge his future. He argued that his aunt could not blame him for giving proof of his energy and daring, and he discoursed in bombastic style.

“That’s enough!” cried Madame Desvarennes, interrupting her nephew’s oration. “I am very fond of mills, but not word-mills. You are talking too much about it to be sincere. So many words can only serve to disguise the nullity of your projects. You want to embark in speculation? With what money?”

“I contribute the scheme and some capitalists will advance the money to start with; we shall then issue shares!”

“Never in this life! I oppose it. You! With a re-

SERGE PANINE

sponsibility. You! Directing an undertaking. You would only commit absurdities. In fact, you want to sell an idea, eh? Well, I will buy it."

"It is not only the money I want," said Savinien, with an indignant air, "it is confidence in my ideas, it is enthusiasm on the part of my shareholders, it is success. You don't believe in my ideas, aunt!"

"What does it matter to you, if I buy them from you? It seems to me a pretty good proof of confidence. Is that settled?"

"Ah, aunt, you are implacable!" groaned Savinien. "When you have laid your hand upon any one, it is all over. Adieu, independence; one must obey you. Nevertheless, it was a vast and beautiful conception."

"Very well. Maréchal, see that my nephew has ten thousand francs. And you, Savinien, remember that I see no more of you."

"Until the money is spent!" murmured Maréchal, in the ear of Madame Desvarennes's nephew.

And taking him by the arm he was leading him toward the safe when the mistress turned to Savinien and said:

"By the way, what is your invention?"

"Aunt, it is a threshing machine," answered the young man, gravely.

"Rather a machine for coining money," said the incorrigible Maréchal, in an undertone.

"Well, bring me your plans," resumed Madame Desvarennes, after having reflected a moment. "Perchance you may have hit upon something."

The mistress had been generous, and now the woman

GEORGES OHNET

of business reasserted herself and she thought of reaping the benefit.

Savinien seemed very confused at this demand, and as his aunt gave him an interrogative look, he confessed:

“There are no drawings made as yet.”

“No drawings as yet?” cried the mistress. “Where then is your invention?”

“It is here,” replied Savinien, and with an inspired gesture he struck his narrow forehead.

Madame Desvarennes and Maréchal could not resist breaking out into a laugh.

“And you were already talking of issuing shares?” said the mistress. “Do you think people would have paid their money with your brain as sole guarantee? You! Get along; I am the only one to make bargains like that, and you are the only one with whom I make them. Go, Maréchal, give him his money; I won’t gainsay it. But you are a trickster, as usual!”

CHAPTER III

PIERRE RETURNS



Y a wave of her hand she dismissed Savinien, who, abashed, went out with Maréchal. Left alone, she seated herself at her secretary's desk, and taking the pile of letters she signed them. The pen flew in her fingers, and on the paper was displayed her name, written in large letters in a man's handwriting.

She had been occupied thus for about a quarter of an hour when Maréchal reappeared. Behind him came a stout thick-set man of heavy build, and gorgeously dressed. His face, surrounded by a bristly dark brown beard, and his eyes overhung by bushy eyebrows, gave him, at the first glance, a harsh appearance. But his mouth promptly banished this impression. His thick and sensual lips betrayed voluptuous tastes. A disciple of Lavater or Gall would have found the bump of amativeness largely developed.

Maréchal stepped aside to allow him to pass.

"Good-morning, mistress," said he familiarly, approaching Madame Desvarennes.

The mistress raised her head quickly, and said:

"Ah! it's you, Cayrol! That's capital! I was just going to send for you."

GEORGES OHNET

Jean Cayrol, a native of Cantal, had been brought up amid the wild mountains of Auvergne. His father was a small farmer in the neighborhood of Saint-Flour, scraping a miserable pittance from the ground for the maintenance of his family. From the age of eight years Cayrol had been a shepherd-boy. Alone in the quiet and remote country, the child had given way to ambitious dreams. He was very intelligent, and felt that he was born to another sphere than that of farming.

Thus, at the first opportunity which had occurred to take him into a town, he was found ready. He went as servant to a banker at Brioude. There, in the service of this comparatively luxurious house, he got smoothed down a little, and lost some of his clumsy loutishness. Strong as an ox, he did the work of two men, and at night, when in his garret, fell asleep learning to read. He was seized by the ambition to get on. No pains were to be spared to gain his goal.

His master having been elected a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Cayrol accompanied him to Paris. Life in the capital finished the turmoil of Cayrol's brain. Seeing the prodigious activity of the great city on whose pavements fortunes sprang up in a day like mushrooms, the Auvergnat felt his moral strength equal to the occasion, and leaving his master, he became clerk to a merchant in the Rue du Sentier.

There, for four years, he studied commerce, and gained much experience. He soon learned that it was only in financial transactions that large fortunes were to be rapidly made. He left the Rue du Sentier, and found a place at a stock-broker's. His keen scent for

SERGE PANINE

speculation served him admirably. After the lapse of a few years he had charge of the business. His position was getting better; he was making fifteen thousand francs per annum, but that was nothing compared to his dreams. He was then twenty-eight years of age. He felt ready to do anything to succeed, except something unhandsome, for this lover of money would have died rather than enrich himself by dishonest means.

It was at this time that his lucky star threw him in Madame Desvarennes's way. The mistress, understanding men, guessed Cayrol's worth quickly. She was seeking a banker who would devote himself to her interests. She watched the young man narrowly for some time; then, sure she was not mistaken as to his capacity, she bluntly proposed to give him money to start a business. Cayrol, who had already saved eighty thousand francs, received twelve hundred thousand from Madame Desvarennes, and settled in the Rue Taitbout, two steps from the house of Rothschild.

Madame Desvarennes had made a lucky hit in choosing Cayrol as her confidential agent. This short, thick-set Auvergnat was a master of finance, and in a few years had raised the house to an unexpected degree of prosperity. Madame Desvarennes had drawn considerable sums as interest on the money lent, and the banker's fortune was already estimated at several millions. Was it the happy influence of Madame Desvarennes that changed everything she touched into gold, or were Cayrol's capacities really extraordinary? The results were there and that was sufficient. They did not trouble themselves over and above that.

GEORGES OHNET

The banker had naturally become one of the intimates of Madame Desvarennes's house. For a long time he saw Jeanne without particularly noticing her. This young girl had not struck his fancy. It was one night at a ball, on seeing her dancing with Prince Panine, that he perceived that she was marvellously engaging. His eyes were attracted by an invincible power and followed her graceful figure whirling through the waltz. He secretly envied the brilliant cavalier who was holding this adorable creature in his arms, who was bending over her bare shoulders, and whose breath lightly touched her hair. He longed madly for Jeanne, and from that moment thought only of her.

The Prince was then very friendly with Mademoiselle de Cernay; he overwhelmed her with kind attentions. Cayrol watched him to see if he spoke to her of love, but Panine was a past master in these drawing-room skirmishes, and the banker got nothing for his pains. That Cayrol was tenacious has been proved. He became intimate with the Prince. He tendered him such little services as create intimacy, and when he was sure of not being repulsed with haughtiness, he questioned Serge. Did he love Mademoiselle de Cernay? This question, asked in a trembling voice and with a constrained smile, found the Prince quite calm. He answered lightly that Mademoiselle de Cernay was a very agreeable partner, but that he had never dreamed of offering her his homage. He had other projects in his head. Cayrol pressed the Prince's hand violently, made a thousand protestations of devotedness, and finally obtained his complete confidence.

SERGE PANINE

Serge loved Mademoiselle Desvarennes, and it was to become intimate with her that he had so eagerly sought her friend's company. Cayrol, in learning the Prince's secret, resumed his usual reserved manner. He knew that Micheline was engaged to Pierre Delarue, but still, women were so whimsical! Who could tell? Perhaps Mademoiselle Desvarennes had looked favorably upon the handsome Serge.

He was really admirable to view, this Panine, with his blue eyes, pure as a maiden's, and his long fair mustache falling on each side of his rosy mouth. He had a truly royal bearing, and was descended from an ancient aristocratic race; he had a charming hand and an arched foot, enough to make a woman envious. Soft and insinuating with his tender voice and sweet Sclavonic accent, he was no ordinary man, but one usually creating a great impression wherever he went.

His story was well known in Paris. He was born in the province of Posen, so violently seized on by Prussia, that octopus of Europe. Serge's father had been killed during the insurrection of 1848, and he, when a year old, was brought by his uncle, Thaddeus Panine, to France, and was educated at the Collège Rollin, where he had not acquired over much learning.

In 1866, at the moment when war broke out between Prussia and Austria, Serge was eighteen years old. By his uncle's orders he had left Paris, and had entered himself for the campaign in an Austrian cavalry regiment. All who bore the name of Panine, and had strength to hold a sword or carry a gun, had risen to fight the oppressor of Poland. Serge, during this short

GEORGES OHNET

and bloody struggle, showed prodigies of valor. On the night of Sadowa, out of seven bearing the name of Panine, who had served against Prussia, five were dead, one was wounded; Serge alone was untouched, though red with the blood of his uncle Thaddeus, who was killed by the bursting of a shell. All these Panines, living or dead, had gained honors. When they were spoken of before Austrians or Poles, they were called heroes.

Such a man was a dangerous companion for a young, simple, and artless girl like Micheline. His adventures were bound to please her imagination, and his beauty sure to charm her eyes. Cayrol was a prudent man; he watched, and it was not long before he perceived that Micheline treated the Prince with marked favor. The quiet young girl became animated when Serge was there. Was there love in this transformation? Cayrol did not hesitate. He guessed at once that the future would be Panine's, and that the maintenance of his own influence in the house of Desvarennes depended on the attitude which he was about to take. He passed over to the side of the newcomer with arms and baggage, and placed himself entirely at his disposal.

It was he who three weeks before, in the name of Panine, had made overtures to Madame Desvarennes. The errand had been difficult, and the banker had turned his tongue several times in his mouth before speaking. Still, Cayrol could overcome all difficulties. He was able to explain the object of his mission without Madame flying into a passion. But, the explanation over, there was a terrible scene. He witnessed one of the most awful bursts of rage that it was possible to

SERGE PANINE

expect from a violent woman. The mistress treated the friend of the family as one would not have dared to treat a petty commercial traveller who came to a private house to offer his wares. She showed him the door, and desired him not to darken the threshold again.

But if Cayrol was resolute he was equally patient. He listened without saying a word to the reproaches of Madame Desvarennes, who was exasperated that a candidate should be set up in opposition to the son-in-law of her choosing. He did not go, and when Madame Desvarennes was a little calmed by the letting out of her indignation, he argued with her. The mistress was too hasty about the business; it was no use deciding without reflecting. Certainly, nobody esteemed Pierre Delarue more than he did; but it was necessary to know whether Micheline loved him. A childish affection was not love, and Prince Panine thought he might hope that Mademoiselle Desvarennes——

The mistress did not allow Cayrol to finish his sentence; she rang the bell and asked for her daughter. This time, Cayrol prudently took the opportunity of disappearing. He had opened fire; it was for Micheline to decide the result of the battle. The banker awaited the issue of the interview between mother and daughter in the next room. Through the door he heard the irritated tones of Madame Desvarennes, to which Micheline answered softly and slowly. The mother threatened and stormed. Coldly and quietly the daughter received the attack. The tussle lasted about an hour, when the door reopened and Madame Desvarennes appeared, pale and still trembling, but calmed.

GEORGES OHNET

Micheline, wiping her beautiful eyes, still wet with tears, regained her apartment.

"Well," said Cayrol timidly, seeing the mistress standing silent and absorbed before him; "I see with pleasure that you are less agitated. Did Mademoiselle Micheline give you good reasons?"

"Good reasons!" cried Madame Desvarennes with a violent gesture, last flash of the late storm. "She cried, that's all. And you know when she cries I no longer know what I do or say! She breaks my heart with her tears. And she knows it. Ah! it is a great misfortune to love children too much!"

This energetic woman was conquered, and yet understood that she was wrong to allow herself to be conquered. She fell into a deep reverie, and forgot that Cayrol was present. She thought of the future which she had planned for Micheline, and which the latter carelessly destroyed in an instant.

Pierre, now an orphan, would have been a real son to the mistress. He would have lived in her house, and have surrounded her old age with care and affection. And then, he was so full of ability that he could not help attaining a brilliant position. She would have helped him, and would have rejoiced in his success. And all this scaffolding was overturned because this Panine had crossed Micheline's path. A foreign adventurer, prince perhaps, but who could tell? Lies are easily told when the proofs of the lie have to be sought beyond the frontiers. And it was her daughter who was going to fall in love with an insipid fop who only coveted her millions. That she should see such a man enter her family, steal

SERGE PANINE

Micheline's love from her, and rummage her strong-box! In a moment she vowed mortal hatred against Panine, and resolved to do all she could to prevent the longed-for marriage with her daughter.

She was disturbed in her meditation by Cayrol's voice. He wished to take an answer to the Prince. What must he say to him?

"You will let him know," said Madame Desvarennnes, "that he must refrain from seeking opportunities of meeting my daughter. If he be a gentleman, he will understand that his presence, even in Paris, is disagreeable to me. I ask him to go away for three weeks. After that time he may come back, and I agree to give him an answer."

"You promise me that you will not be vexed with me for having undertaken this errand?"

"I promise on one condition. It is, that not a word which has passed here this morning shall be repeated to any one. Nobody must suspect the proposal that you have just made to me."

Cayrol swore to hold his tongue, and he kept his word. Prince Panine left that same night for England.

Madame Desvarennnes was a woman of quick resolution. She took a sheet of paper, a pen, and in her large handwriting wrote the following lines addressed to Pierre:

"If you do not wish to find Micheline married on your return, come back without a moment's delay."

She sent this ominous letter to the young man, who was then in Tripoli. That done, she returned to her business as if nothing had happened. Her placid face

GEORGES OHNET

did not once betray the anguish of her heart during those three weeks.

The term fixed by Madame Desvarennes with the Prince had expired that morning. And the severity with which the mistress had received the Minister of War's Financial Secretary was a symptom of the agitation in which the necessity of coming to a decision placed Micheline's mother. Every morning for the last week she had expected Pierre to arrive. What with having to give an answer to the Prince as she had promised, and the longing to see him whom she loved as a son, she felt sick at heart and utterly cast down. She thought of asking the Prince for a respite. It was for that reason she was glad to see Cayrol.

The latter, therefore, had arrived opportunely. He looked as if he brought startling news. By a glance he drew Madame Desvarennes's attention to Maréchal and seemed to say:

“I must be alone with you; send him away.”

The mistress understood, and with a decided gesture said:

“You can speak before Maréchal; he knows all my affairs as well as I do myself.”

“Even the matter that brings me here?” replied Cayrol, with surprise.

“Even that. It was necessary for me to have some one to whom I could speak, or else my heart would have burst! Come, do your errand. The Prince?”

“A lot it has to do with the Prince,” exclaimed Cayrol, in a huff. “Pierre has arrived!”

Madame Desvarennes rose abruptly. A rush of

SERGE PANINE

blood rose to her face, her eyes brightened, and her lips opened with a smile.

"At last!" she cried. "But where is he? How did you hear of his return?"

"Ah! faith, it was just by chance. I was shooting yesterday at Fontainebleau, and I returned this morning by the express. On arriving at Paris, I alighted on the platform, and there I found myself face to face with a tall young man with a long beard, who, seeing me pass, called out, 'Ah, Cayrol!' It was Pierre. I only recognized him by his voice. He is much changed; with his beard, and his complexion bronzed like an African."

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. He pressed my hand. He looked at me for a moment with glistening eyes. There was something on his lips which he longed to ask, yet did not; but I guessed it. I was afraid of giving way to tenderness, that might have ended in my saying something foolish, so I left him."

"How long ago is that?"

"About an hour ago. I only just ran home before coming on here. There I found Panine waiting for me. He insisted upon accompanying me. I hope you won't blame him?"

Madame Desvarennnes frowned.

"I will not see him just now," she said, looking at Cayrol with a resolute air. "Where did you leave him?"

"In the garden, where I found the young ladies."

As if to verify the banker's words, a merry peal of

GEORGES OHNET

laughter was heard through the half-open window. It was Micheline, who, with returning gayety, was making up for the three weeks' sadness she had experienced during Panine's absence.

Madame Desvarennes went to the window, and looked into the garden. Seated on the lawn, in large bamboo chairs, the young girls were listening to a story the Prince was telling. The morning was bright and mild; the sun shining through Micheline's silk sun-shade lit up her fair head. Before her, Serge, bending his tall figure, was speaking with animation. Micheline's eyes were softly fixed on him. Reclining in her armchair, she allowed herself to be carried away with his conversation, and thoroughly enjoyed his society, of which she had been deprived for the last three weeks. Beside her, Jeanne, silently watching the Prince, was mechanically nibbling, with her white teeth, a bunch of carnations which she held in her hands. A painful thought contracted Mademoiselle de Cernay's brow, and her pale lips on the red flowers seemed to be drinking blood.

The mistress slowly turned away from this scene. A shadow had crossed her brow, which had, for a moment, become serene again at the announcement of Pierre's arrival. She remained silent for a little while, as if considering; then coming to a resolution, and turning to Cayrol, she said:

“Where is Pierre staying?”

“At the Hôtel du Louvre,” replied the banker.

“Well, I'm going there.”

Madame Desvarennes rang the bell violently.

SERGE PANINE

"My bonnet, my cloak, and the carriage," she said, and with a friendly nod to the two men, she went out quickly.

Micheline was still laughing in the garden. Maréchal and Cayrol looked at each other. Cayrol was the first to speak.

"The mistress told you all about the matter then? How is it you never spoke to me about it?"

"Should I have been worthy of Madame Desvarennnes's confidence had I spoken of what she wished to keep secret?"

"To me?"

"Especially to you. The attitude which you have taken forbade my speaking. You favor Prince Panine?"

"And you; you are on Pierre Delarue's side?"

"I take no side. I am only a subordinate, you know; I do not count."

"Do not attempt to deceive me. Your influence over the mistress is great. The confidence she has in you is a conclusive proof. Important events are about to take place here. Pierre has certainly returned to claim his right as betrothed, and Mademoiselle Micheline loves Prince Serge. Out of this a serious conflict will take place in the house. There will be a battle. And as the parties in question are about equal in strength, I am seeking adherents for my candidate. I own, in all humility, I am on love's side. The Prince is beloved by Mademoiselle Desvarennnes, and I serve him. Micheline will be grateful, and will do me a turn with Mademoiselle de Cernay. As to you, let me give you a little

GEORGES OHNET

advice. If Madame Desvarennes consults you, speak well of Panine. When the Prince is master here, your position will be all the better for it."

Maréchal had listened to Cayrol without anything betraying the impression his words created. He looked at the banker in a peculiar manner, which caused him to feel uncomfortable, and made him lower his eyes.

"Perhaps you do not know, Monsieur Cayrol," said the secretary, after a moment's pause, "how I entered this firm. It is as well in that case to inform you. Four years ago, I was most wretched. After having sought fortune ten times without success, I felt myself giving way morally and physically. There are some beings gifted with energy, who can surmount all the difficulties of life. You are one of those. As for me, the struggle exhausted my strength, and I came to grief. It would take too long to enumerate all the ways of earning my living I tried. Few even fed me; and I was thinking of putting an end to my miserable existence when I met Pierre. We had been at college together. I went toward him; he was on the quay. I dared to stop him. At first he did not recognize me, I was so haggard, so wretched-looking! But when I spoke, he cried, 'Maréchal!' and, without blushing at my tatters, put his arms round my neck. We were opposite the Belle Jardinière, the clothiers; he wanted to rig me out. I remember as if it were but yesterday I said, 'No, nothing, only find me work!' 'Work, my poor fellow,' he answered, 'but just look at yourself; who would have confidence to give you any? You look like a tramp, and when you accosted me a little while ago, I asked myself if you

SERGE PANINE

were not about to steal my watch!' And he laughed gayly, happy at having found me again, and thinking that he might be of use to me. Seeing that I would not go into the shop, he took off his overcoat, and put it on my back to cover my tattered clothes, and there and then he took me to Madame Desvarennnes. Two days later I entered the office. You see the position I hold, and I owe it to Pierre. He has been more than a friend to me—a brother. Come! after that, tell me what you would think of me if I did what you have just asked me?"

Cayrol was confused; he twisted his bristly beard with his fingers.

"Faith, I do not say that your scruples are not right; but, between ourselves, every step that is taken against the Prince will count for naught. He will marry Mademoiselle Desvarennnes."

"It is possible. In that case, I shall be here to console Pierre and sympathize with him."

"And in the mean time you are going to do all you can in his favor?"

"I have already had the honor of telling you that I cannot do anything——"

"Well, well. One knows what talking means, and you will not change my idea of your importance. You take the weaker side then; that's superb!"

"It is but strictly honest," said Maréchal. "It is true that that quality has become very rare!"

Cayrol wheeled round on his heels. He took a few steps toward the door, then, returning to Maréchal, held out his hand:

GEORGES OHNET

“Without a grudge, eh?”

The secretary allowed his hand to be shaken without answering, and the banker went out, saying to himself:

“He is without a sou and has prejudices! There’s a lad without a future.”

CHAPTER IV

THE RIVALS



N reaching Paris, Pierre Delarue experienced a strange feeling. In his feverish haste he longed for the swiftness of electricity to bring him near Micheline. As soon as he arrived in Paris, he regretted having travelled so fast. He longed to meet his betrothed, yet feared to know his fate.

He had a sort of presentiment that his reception would destroy his hopes. And the more he tried to banish these thoughts, the more forcibly they returned. The thought that Micheline had forgotten her promise made the blood rush to his face.

Madame Desvarennes's short letter suggested it. That his betrothed was lost to him he understood, but he would not admit it. How was it possible that Micheline should forget him? All his childhood passed before his mind. He remembered the sweet and artless evidences of affection which the young girl had given him. And yet she no longer loved him! It was her own mother who said so. After that could he still hope?

A prey to this deep trouble, Pierre entered Paris. On finding himself face to face with Cayrol, the young man's first idea was, as Cayrol had guessed, to cry out, "What's

GEORGES OHNET

going on? Is all lost to me?" A sort of anxious modesty kept back the words on his lips. He would not admit that he doubted. And, then, Cayrol would only have needed to answer that all was over, and that he could put on mourning for his love. He turned around, and went out.

The tumult of Paris surprised and stunned him. After spending a year in the peaceful solitudes of Africa, to find himself amid the cries of street-sellers, the rolling of carriages, and the incessant movement of the great city, was too great a contrast to him. Pierre was overcome by languor; his head seemed too heavy for his body to carry; he mechanically entered a cab which conveyed him to the Hôtel du Louvre. Through the window, against the glass of which he tried to cool his heated forehead, he saw pass in procession before his eyes, the Column of July, the church of St. Paul, the Hôtel de Ville in ruins, and the colonnade of the Louvre.

An absurd idea took possession of him. He remembered that during the Commune he was nearly killed in the Rue Saint-Antoine by the explosion of a shell, thrown by the insurgents from the heights of Père-Lachaise. He thought that had he died then, Micheline would have wept for him. Then, as in a nightmare, it seemed to him that this hypothesis was realized. He saw the church hung with black, he heard the funeral chants. A catafalque contained his coffin, and slowly his betrothed came, with a trembling hand, to throw holy water on the cloth which covered the bier. And a voice said within him:

SERGE PANINE

"You are dead, since Micheline is about to marry another."

He made an effort to banish this importunate idea. He could not succeed. Thoughts flew through his brain with fearful rapidity. He thought he was beginning to be seized with brain fever. And this dismal ceremony kept coming before him with the same chants, the same words repeated, and the same faces appearing. The houses seemed to fly before his vacant eyes. To stop this nightmare he tried to count the gas-lamps—one, two, three, four, five—but the same thought interrupted his calculation:

"You are dead, since your betrothed is about to marry another."

He was afraid he was going mad. A sharp pain shot across his forehead just above the right eyebrow. In the old days he had felt the same pain when he had overworked himself in preparing for his examinations at the Polytechnic School. With a bitter smile he asked himself if one of the aching vessels in his brain was about to burst?

The sudden stoppage of the cab freed him from this torture. The hotel porter opened the door. Pierre stepped out mechanically. Without speaking a word he followed a waiter, who showed him to a room on the second floor. Left alone, he sat down. This room, with its commonplace furniture, chilled him. He saw in it a type of his future life: lonely and desolate. Formerly, when he used to come to Paris, he stayed with Madame Desvarennes, where he had the comforts of home, and every one looked on him affectionately.

GEORGES OHNET

Here, at the hotel, orders were obeyed with politeness at so much a day. Would it always be thus in future?

This painful impression dissipated his weakness as by enchantment. He so bitterly regretted the sweets of the past, that he resolved to struggle to secure them for the future. He dressed himself quickly, and removed all the traces of his journey; then, his mind made up, he jumped into a cab, and drove to Madame Desvarennes's. All indecision had left him. His fears now seemed contemptible. He must defend himself. It was a question of his happiness.

At the Place de la Concorde a carriage passed his cab. He recognized the livery of Madame Desvarennes's coachman and leant forward. The mistress did not see him. He was about to stop the cab and tell his driver to follow her carriage when a sudden thought decided him to go on. It was Micheline he wanted to see. His future destiny depended on her. Madame Desvarennes had made him clearly understand that by calling for his help in her fatal letter. He went on his way, and in a few minutes arrived at the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique.

Micheline and Jeanne were still in the garden, seated in the same place on the lawn. Cayrol had joined Serge. Both, profiting by the lovely morning, were enjoying the society of their beloved ones. A quick step on the gravel walk attracted their attention. In the sunlight a young man, whom neither Jeanne nor Micheline recognized, was advancing. When about two yards distant from the group he slowly raised his hat.

SERGE PANINE

Seeing the constrained and astonished manner of the young girls, a sad smile played on his lips, then he said, softly:

"Am I then so changed that I must tell you my name?"

At these words Micheline jumped up, she became as white as her collar, and trembling, with sobs rising to her lips, stood silent and petrified before Pierre. She could not speak, but her eyes were eagerly fixed on the young man. It was he, the companion of her youth, so changed that she had not recognized him; worn by hard work, perhaps by anxieties, bronzed, and with his face hidden by a black beard which gave him a manly and energetic appearance. It was certainly he, with a thin red ribbon at his button-hole, which he had not when he went away, and which showed the importance of the works he had executed and of great perils he had faced. Pierre, trembling and motionless, was silent; the sound of his voice choked with emotion had frightened him. He had expected a cold reception, but this scared look, which resembled terror, was beyond all he had pictured. Serge wondered and watched.

Jeanne broke the icy silence. She went up to Pierre, and presented her forehead.

"Well," she said, "don't you kiss your friends?"

She smiled affectionately on him. Two grateful tears sparkled in the young man's eyes, and fell on Mademoiselle de Cernay's hair. Micheline, led away by the example and without quite knowing what she was doing, found herself in Pierre's arms. The situation was becoming singularly perplexing to Serge. Cayrol,

GEORGES OHNET

who had not lost his presence of mind, understood it, and turning toward the Prince, said:

"Monsieur Pierre Delarue: an old friend and companion of Mademoiselle Desvarennes's; almost a brother to her," thus explaining in one word all that could appear unusual in such a scene of tenderness.

Then, addressing Pierre, he simply added—"Prince Panine."

The two men looked at each other. Serge, with haughty curiosity; Pierre, with inexpressible rage. In a moment, he guessed that the tall, handsome man beside his betrothed was his rival. If looks could kill, the Prince would have fallen down dead. Panine did not deign to notice the hatred which glistened in the eyes of the newcomer. He turned toward Micheline with exquisite grace and said:

"Your mother receives her friends this evening, I think, Mademoiselle; I shall have the honor of paying my respects to her."

And taking leave of Jeanne with a smile, and of Pierre with a courteous bow, he left, accompanied by Cayrol.

Serge's departure was a relief to Micheline. Between these two men to whom she belonged, to the one by a promise, to the other by an avowal, she felt ashamed. Left alone with Pierre she recovered her self-possession, and felt full of pity for the poor fellow threatened with such cruel deception. She went tenderly to him, with her loving eyes of old, and pressed his hand:

"I am very glad to see you again, my dear Pierre; and my mother will be delighted. We were very anx-

SERGE PANINE

ious about you. You have not written to us for some months."

Pierre tried to joke: "The post does not leave very often in the desert. I wrote whenever I had an opportunity."

"Is it so very pleasant in Africa that you could not tear yourself away a whole year?"

"I had to take another journey on the coast of Tripoli to finish my labors. I was interested in my work, and anxious not to lose the result of so much effort, and I think I have succeeded — at least in the opinion of my employers," said the young man, with a ghastly smile.

"My dear Pierre, you come in time from the land of the sphinx," interrupted Jeanne gravely, and glancing intently at Micheline. "There is here, I assure you, a difficult enigma to solve."

"What is it?"

"That which is written in this heart," she replied, lightly touching her companion's breast.

"From childhood I have always read it as easily as a book," said Pierre, with tremulous voice, turning toward the amazed Micheline.

Mademoiselle de Cernay tossed her head.

"Who knows? Perhaps her disposition has changed during your absence;" and nodding pleasantly, she went toward the house.

Pierre followed her for a moment with his eyes, then, turning toward his betrothed, said:

"Micheline, shall I tell you your secret? You no longer love me."

GEORGES OHNET

The young girl started. The attack was direct. She must at once give an explanation. She had often thought of what she would say when Pierre came back to her. The day had arrived unexpectedly. And the answers she had prepared had fled. The truth appeared harsh and cold. She understood that the change in her was treachery, of which Pierre was the innocent victim; and feeling herself to blame, she waited tremblingly the explosion of this loyal heart so cruelly wounded. She stammered, in tremulous accents:

“Pierre, my friend, my brother.”

“Your brother!” cried the young man, bitterly. “Was that the name you were to give me on my return?”

At these words, which so completely summed up the situation, Micheline remained silent. Still she felt that at all hazards she must defend herself. Her mother might come in at any moment. Between Madame Desvarennes and her betrothed, what would become of her? The hour was decisive. Her strong love for Serge gave her fresh energy.

“Why did you go away?” she asked, with sadness.

Pierre raised with pride his head which had been bent with anguish.

“To be worthy of you,” he merely said.

“You did not need to be worthy of me; you, who were already above every one else. We were betrothed; you only had to guard me.”

“Could not your heart guard itself?”

“Without help, without the support of your presence and affection?”

SERGE PANINE

"Without other help or support than I had myself: Hope and Remembrance."

Micheline turned pale. Each word spoken by Pierre made her feel the unworthiness of her conduct more completely. She endeavored to find a new excuse:

"Pierre, you know I was only a child."

"No," said the young man, with choked voice, "I see that you were already a woman; a being weak, inconstant, and cruel, who cares not for the love she inspires, and sacrifices all to the love she feels."

So long as Pierre had only complained, Micheline felt overwhelmed and without strength; but the young man began to accuse. In a moment the young girl regained her presence of mind and revolted.

"Those are hard words!" she exclaimed.

"Are they not deserved?" cried Pierre, no longer restraining himself. "You saw me arrive trembling, with eyes full of tears, and not only had you not an affectionate word to greet me with, but you almost accuse me of indifference. You reproach me with having gone away. Did you not know my motive for going? I was betrothed to you; you were rich and I was poor. To remove this inequality I resolved to make a name. I sought one of those perilous scientific missions which bring celebrity or death to those who undertake them. Ah! think not that I went away from you without heart-breaking! For a year I was almost alone, crushed with fatigue, always in danger; the thought that I was suffering for you supported me.

"When lost in the vast desert, I was sad and discouraged; I invoked you, and your sweet face gave me fresh

GEORGES OHNET

hope and energy. I said to myself, 'She is waiting for me. A day will come when I shall win the prize of all my trouble.' Well, Micheline, the day has come; here I am, returned, and I ask for my reward. Is it what I had a right to expect? While I was running after glory, another, more practical and better advised, stole your heart. My happiness is destroyed. You did well to forget me. The fool who goes so far away from his betrothed does not deserve her faithfulness. He is cold, indifferent, he does not know how to love!"

These vehement utterances troubled Micheline deeply. For the first time she understood her betrothed, felt how much he loved her, and regretted not having known it before. If Pierre had spoken like that before going away, who knows? Micheline's feelings might have been quickened. No doubt she would have loved him. It would have come naturally. But Pierre had kept the secret of his passion for the young girl to himself. It was only despair, and the thought of losing her, that made him give vent to his feelings now.

"I see that I have been cruel and unjust to you," said Micheline. "I deserve your reproaches, but I am not the only one to blame. You, too, are at fault. What I have just heard has upset me. I am truly sorry to cause you so much pain; but it is too late. I no longer belong to myself."

"And did you belong to yourself?"

"No! It is true, you had my word, but be generous. Do not abuse the authority which being my betrothed gives you. That promise I would now ask back from you."

SERGE PANINE

"And if I refuse to release you from your promise? If I tried to regain your love?" cried Pierre, forcibly. "Have I not the right to defend myself? And what would you think of my love if I relinquished you so readily?"

There was a moment's silence. The interview was at its highest pitch of excitement. Micheline knew that she must put an end to it. She replied with firmness:

"A girl such as I am will not break her word; mine belongs to you, but my heart is another's. Say you insist, and I am ready to keep my promise to become your wife. It is for you to decide."

Pierre gave the young girl a look which plunged into the depths of her heart. He read there her resolve that she would act loyally, but that at the same time she would never forget him who had so irresistibly gained her heart. He made a last effort.

"Listen," he said, with ardent voice, "it is impossible that you can have forgotten me so soon: I love you so much! Remember our affection in the old days, Micheline. Remember——"

He no longer argued; he pleaded. Micheline felt victorious. She was moved with pity.

"Alas! my poor Pierre, my affection was only friendship, and my heart has not changed toward you. The love which I now feel is quite different. If it had not come to me, I might have been your wife. And I esteemed you so much, that I should have been happy. But now I understand the difference. You, whom I had accepted, would never have been more to me than

GEORGES OHNET

a tender companion; he whom I have chosen will be my master."

Pierre uttered a cry at this cruel and frank avowal.

"Ah! how you hurt me!"

And bitter tears rolled down his face to the relief of his overburdened heart. He sank on to a seat, and for a moment gave way to violent grief. Micheline, more touched by his despair than she had been by his reproaches, went to him and wiped his face with her lace handkerchief. Her white hand was close to the young man's mouth, and he kissed it eagerly. Then, as if roused by the action, he rose with a changed look in his eyes, and seized the young girl in his arms. Micheline did not utter a word. She looked coldly and resolutely at Pierre, and threw back her head to avoid the contact of his eager lips. That look was enough. The arms which held her were unloosed, and Pierre moved away, murmuring:

"I beg your pardon. You see I am not in my right mind."

Then passing his hand across his forehead as if to chase away a wicked thought, he added:

"So it is irrevocable? You love him?"

"Enough to give you so much pain; enough to be nobody's unless I belong to him."

Pierre reflected a moment, then, coming to a decision:

"Go, you are free," said he; "I give you back your promise."

Micheline uttered a cry of triumph, which made him who had been her betrothed turn pale. She regretted

SERGE PANINE

not having hidden her joy better. She approached Pierre and said:

"Tell me that you forgive me!"

"I forgive you."

"You still weep?"

"Yes; I am weeping over my lost happiness. I thought the best means of being loved were to deserve it. I was mistaken. I will courageously atone for my error. Excuse my weakness, and believe that you will never have a more faithful and devoted friend than I."

Micheline gave him her hand, and, smiling, bowed her forehead to his lips. He slowly impressed a brotherly kiss, which effaced the burning trace of the one which he had stolen a moment before.

At the same time a deep voice was heard in the distance, calling Pierre. Micheline trembled.

"'Tis my mother," she said. "She is seeking you. I will leave you. Adieu, and a thousand thanks from my very heart."

And nimbly springing behind a clump of lilac-trees in flower, Micheline disappeared.

Pierre mechanically went toward the house. He ascended the marble steps and entered the drawing-room. As he shut the door, Madame Desvarennes appeared.

CHAPTER V

A CRITICAL INTERVIEW

ADAME DESVARENNES had been driven to the Hôtel du Louvre without losing a minute. She most wanted to know in what state of mind her daughter's betrothed had arrived in Paris. Had the letter, which brutally told him the truth, roused him and tightened the springs of his will? Was he ready for the struggle?

If she found him confident and bold, she had only to settle with him as to the common plan of action which must bring about the eviction of the audacious candidate who wished to marry Micheline. If she found him discouraged and doubtful of himself, she had decided to animate him with her ardor against Serge Panine.

She prepared these arguments on the way, and, boiling with impatience, outstripped in thought the fleet horse which was drawing her past the long railings of the Tuileries toward the Hôtel du Louvre. Wrapped in her meditations she did not see Pierre. She was saying to herself:

“This fair-haired Polish dandy does not know with whom he has to deal. He will see what sort of a woman I am. He has not risen early enough in the morning to

SERGE PANINE

hoodwink me. If Pierre is only of the same opinion as I, we shall soon spoil this fortune-hunter's work."

The carriage stopped.

"Monsieur Pierre Delarue?" inquired the mistress.

"Madame, he went out a quarter of an hour ago."

"To go where?"

"He did not say."

"Do you know whether he will be absent long?"

"I don't know."

"Much obliged."

Madame Desvarennes, quite discomfited by this mischance, reflected. Where could Pierre have gone? Probably to her house. Without losing a minute, she reentered the carriage, and gave orders to return to the Rue Saint-Dominique. If he had gone at once to her house, it was plain that he was ready to do anything to keep Micheline. The coachman who had received the order drove furiously. She said to herself:

"Pierre is in a cab. Allowing that he is driving moderately quick he will only have half-an-hour's start of me. He will pass through the office, will see Maréchal, and however eager he be, will lose a quarter of an hour in chatting to him. It would be most vexing if he did anything foolish in the remaining fifteen minutes! The fault is mine: I ought to have sent him a letter at Marseilles, to tell him what line of conduct to adopt on his arrival. So long as he does not meet Micheline on entering the house!"

At that idea Madame Desvarennes felt the blood rushing to her face. She put her head out of the carriage window, and called to the coachman:

GEORGES OHNET

"Drive faster!"

He drove more furiously still, and in a few minutes reached the Rue Saint-Dominique.

She tore into the house like a hurricane, questioned the hall-porter, and learned that Delarue had arrived. She hastened to Maréchal, and asked him in such a strange manner, "Have you seen Pierre?" that he thought some accident had happened.

On seeing her secretary's scared look, she understood that what she most dreaded had come to pass. She hurried to the drawing-room, calling Pierre in a loud voice. The French window opened, and she found herself face to face with the young man. A glance at her adopted son's face increased her fears. She opened her arms and clasped Pierre to her heart.

After the first emotions were over, she longed to know what had happened during her absence, and inquired of Pierre:

"By whom were you received on arriving here?"

"By Micheline."

"That is what I feared! What did she tell you?"

"Everything!"

In three sentences these two strong beings had summed up all that had taken place. Madame Desvarennes remained silent for a moment, then, with sudden tenderness, and as if to make up for her daughter's treachery, said:

"Come, let me kiss you again, my poor boy. You suffer, eh? and I too! I am quite overcome. For ten years I have cherished the idea of your marrying Micheline. You are a man of merit, and you have no

SERGE PANINE

relatives. You would not take my daughter away from me; on the contrary I think you like me, and would willingly live with me. In arranging this marriage I realized the dream of my life. I was not taking a son-in-law—I was gaining a new child."

"Believe me," said Pierre, sadly, "it is not my fault that your wish is not carried out."

"That, my boy, is another question!" cried Madame Desvarennnes, whose voice was at once raised two tones. "And that is where we do not agree. You are responsible for what has occurred. I know what you are going to tell me. You wished to bring laurels to Micheline as a dower. That is all nonsense! When one leaves the Polytechnic School with honors, and with a future open to you like yours, it is not necessary to scour the deserts to dazzle a young girl. One begins by marrying her, and celebrity comes afterward, at the same time as the children. And then there was no need to risk all at such a cost. What, are we then so grand? Ex-bakers! Millionaires, certainly, which does not alter the fact that poor Desvarennnes carried out the bread, and that I gave change across the counter when folks came to buy sou-cakes! But you wanted to be a knight-errant, and, during that time, a handsome fellow. Did Micheline tell you the gentleman's name?"

"I met him when I came here; he was with her in the garden. We were introduced to each other."

"That was good taste," said Madame Desvarennnes with irony. "Oh, he is a youth who is not easily disturbed, and in his most passionate transports will not disarrange a fold of his cravat. You know he is a

GEORGES OHNET

Prince? That is most flattering to the Desvarennes! We shall use his coat-of-arms as our trade-mark. The fortune-hunter, ugh! No doubt he said to himself: 'The baker has money—and her daughter is agreeable.' And he is making a business of it."

"He is only following the example of many of his equals. Marriage is to-day the sole pursuit of the nobility."

"The nobility! That of our country might be tolerated, but foreign noblemen are mere adventurers."

"It is well known that the Panines come from Posen—the papers have mentioned them more than twenty times."

"Why is he not in his own country?"

"He is exiled."

"He has done something wrong, then!"

"He has, like all his family, fought for independence."

"Then he is a revolutionist!"

"A patriot."

"You are very kind to tell me all that."

"I may hate Prince Panine," said Pierre, simply, "but that is no reason why I should not be just to him."

"So be it; he is an exceptional being, a great citizen, a hero, if you like. But that does not prove that he will make my daughter happy. And if you take my advice, we shall send him about his business in a very short time."

Madame Desvarennes was excited and paced hurriedly up and down the room. The idea of resuming the offensive after she had been forced to act on the defensive for months past pleased her. She thought

SERGE PANINE

Pierre argued too much. A woman of action, she did not understand why Pierre had not yet come to a resolution. She felt that she must gain his confidence.

"You are master of the situation," she said. "The Prince does not suit me——"

"Micheline loves him," interrupted Pierre.

"She fancies so," replied Madame Desvarennes. "She has got it into her head, but it will wear off. You thoroughly understand that I did not bid you to come from Africa to be present at my daughter's wedding. If you are a man, we shall see some fun. Micheline is your betrothed. You have our word, and the word of a Desvarennes is as good as the signature. It has never been dishonored. Well, refuse to give us back our promise. Gain time, make love, and take my daughter away from that dandy."

Pierre remained silent for a few minutes. In a moment he measured the extent of the mischief done, by seeing Micheline before consulting Madame Desvarennes. With the help of this energetic woman he might have struggled, whereas left to his own strength, he had at the outset been vanquished and forced to lay down his arms. Not only had he yielded, but he had drawn his ally into his defeat.

"Your encouragements come too late," said he. "Micheline asked me to give her back her promise, and I gave it to her."

"You were so weak as that!" cried Madame Desvarennes. "And she had so much boldness? Does she dote on him so? I suspected her plans, and I hastened to warn you. But all is not lost. You have given Mi-

GEORGES OHNET

cheline back her promise. So be it. But I have not given you back yours. You are pledged to me. I will not countenance the marriage which my daughter has arranged without my consent! Help me to break it off. And, faith, you could easily find another woman worth Micheline, but where shall I find a son-in-law worth you? Come, the happiness of us all is in peril; save it!"

"Why continue the struggle? I am beaten beforehand."

"But if you forsake me, what can I do single-handed with Micheline?"

"Do what she wishes, as usual. You are surprised at my giving you this advice? It is no merit on my part. Until now you have refused your daughter's request; but if she comes again beseeching and crying, you who are so strong and can say so well 'I will,' will be weak and will not be able to refuse her her Prince. Believe me; consent willingly. Who knows? Your son-in-law may be grateful to you for it by-and-by."

Madame Desvarennes had listened to Pierre with amazement.

"Really, you are incredible," she said; "you discuss all this so calmly. Have you no grief?"

"Yes," replied Pierre, solemnly, "it is almost killing me."

"Nonsense! You are boasting!" cried Madame Desvarennes, vehemently. "Ah, scholar! figures have dried up your heart!"

"No," replied the young man, with melancholy, "but work has destroyed in me the seductions of youth. It has made me thoughtful, and a little sad. I fright-

SERGE PANINE

ened Micheline, instead of attracting her. The worst is that we live in such a state of high pressure, it is quite impossible to grasp all that is offered to us in this life—work and pleasure. It is necessary to make a choice, to economize one's time and strength, and to work with either the heart or the brain alone. The result is that the neglected organ wastes away, and that men of pleasure remain all their lives mediocre workers, while hard workers are pitiful lovers. The former sacrifice the dignity of existence, the latter that which is the charm of existence. So that, in decisive moments, when the man of pleasure appeals to his intelligence, he finds he is unfit for duty, and when the man of toil appeals to his heart, he finds that he is unqualified for happiness."

"Well, my boy, so much the worse for the women who cannot appreciate men of work, and who allow themselves to be wheedled by men of pleasure. I never was one of those; and serious as you are, thirty years ago I would have jumped at you. But as you know your ailment so well, why don't you cure yourself? The remedy is at hand."

"What is it?"

"Strong will. Marry Micheline. I'll answer for everything."

"She does not love me."

"A woman always ends by loving her husband."

"I love Micheline too much to accept her hand without her heart."

Madame Desvarennnes saw that she would gain nothing, and that the game was irrevocably lost. A great

GEORGES OHNET

sorrow stole over her. She foresaw a dark future, and had a presentiment that trouble had entered the house with Serge Panine. What could she do? Combat the infatuation of her daughter! She knew that life would be odious for her if Micheline ceased to laugh and to sing. Her daughter's tears would conquer her will. Pierre had told her truly. Where was the use of fighting when defeat was certain? She, too, felt that she was powerless, and with heartfelt sorrow came to a decision.

"Come, I see that I must make up my mind to be grandmother to little princes. It pleases me but little on the father's account. My daughter will have a sad lot with a fellow of that kind. Well, he had better keep in the right path; for I shall be there to call him to order. Micheline *must* be happy. When my husband was alive, I was already more of a mother than a wife; now my whole life is wrapped up in my daughter."

Then raising her vigorous arms with grim energy, she added:

"Do you know, if my daughter were made miserable through her husband, I should be capable of killing him."

These were the last words of the interview which decided the destiny of Micheline, of the Prince, of Madame Desvarennes, and of Pierre. The mistress stretched out her hand and rang the bell. A servant appeared, to whom she gave instructions to tell Maréchal to come down. She thought it would be pleasant for Pierre to pour out his griefs into the heart of his friend. A man weeps with difficulty before a woman, and she guessed

SERGE PANINE

that the young man's heart was swollen with tears. Maréchal was not far off. He arrived in a moment, and springing toward Pierre put his arms round his neck. When Madame Desvarennes saw the two friends fully engrossed with each other, she said to Maréchal:

"I give you leave until this evening. Then bring Pierre back with you; I wish to see him after dinner."

And with a firm step she went toward Micheline's room, where the latter was waiting in fear to know the result of the interview.

CHAPTER VI

A SIGNIFICANT MEETING



HE mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique is certainly one of the finest to be seen. Sovereigns alone have more sumptuous palaces. The wide staircase, of carved oak, is bordered by a bronze balustrade, made by Ghirlan-dajo, and brought from Florence by Sommervieux, the great dealer in curiosities. Baron Rothschild would consent to give only a hundred thousand francs for it. Madame Desverrennes bought it. The large panels of the staircase are hung with splendid tapestry, from designs by Boucher, representing the different metamorphoses of Jupiter. At each landing-place stands a massive Japanese vase of *cloisonné* enamel, supported by a tripod of Chinese bronze, representing chimeras. On the first floor, tall columns of red granite, crowned by gilt capitals, divide the staircase from a gallery, serving as a conservatory. Plaited blinds of crimson silk hang before the Gothic windows, filled with marvellous stained glass.

In the vestibule—the hangings of which are of Cordova leather, with gold ground—seemingly awaiting the good pleasure of some grand lady, is a sedan-chair, decorated with paintings by Fragonard. Farther on, there

SERGE PANINE

is one of those superb carved mother-of-pearl coffers, in which Oriental women lay by their finery and jewellery. A splendid Venetian mirror, its frame embellished with tiny figure subjects, and measuring two mètres in width and three in height, fills a whole panel of the vestibule. Portières of Chinese satin, ornamented with striking embroidery, such as figures on a priest's chasuble, fall in sumptuous folds at the drawing-room and dining-room doors.

The drawing-room contains a splendid set of Louis Quatorze furniture, of gilt wood, upholstered in fine tapestry, in an extraordinary state of preservation. Three crystal lustres, hanging at intervals along the room, sparkle like diamonds. The hangings, of woven silk and gold, are those which were sent as a present by Louis Quatorze to Monsieur de Pimentel, the Spanish Ambassador, to reward him for the part he had taken in the conclusion of the Treaty of the Pyrenees. These hangings are unique, and were brought back from Spain in 1814, in the baggage-train of Soult's army, and sold to an inhabitant of Toulouse for ten thousand francs. It was there that Madame Desvarennes discovered them in a garret in 1864, neglected by the grandchildren of the buyer, who were ignorant of the immense value of such unrivalled work. Cleverly mended, they are to-day the pride of the great trader's drawing-room. On the mantelpiece there is a large clock in Chinese lacquer, ornamented with gilt bronze, made on a model sent out from Paris in the reign of Louis Quatorze, and representing the Flight of the Hours pursued by Time.

GEORGES OHNET

Adjoining the great drawing-room is a boudoir upholstered in light gray silk damask, with bouquets of flowers. This is Madame Desvarennnes's favorite room. A splendid Erard piano occupies one side of the apartment. Facing it is a sideboard in sculptured ebony, enriched with bronze, by Gouthières. There are only two pictures on the walls: "The Departure of the Newly Married Couple," exquisitely painted by Lancret; and "The Prediction," an adorable work by Watteau, bought at an incredible price at the Pourtalès sale. Over the chimney-piece is a miniature by Pommayrac, representing Micheline as a little child—a treasure which Madame Desvarennnes cannot behold without tears coming to her eyes. A door, hidden by curtains, opens on to a staircase leading directly to the courtyard.

The dining-room is in the purest Renaissance style: austere woodwork; immense chests of carved pear-wood, on which stand precious ewers in Urbino ware, and dishes by Bernard Palissy. The high stone fireplace is surmounted by a portrait of Diana of Poitiers, with a crescent on her brow, and is furnished with fire-dogs of elaborately worked iron. The centre panel bears the arms of Admiral Bonnivet. Stained-glass windows admit a softly-tinted light. From the magnificently painted ceiling, a chandelier of brass *repoussé* work hangs from the claws of a hovering eagle.

The billiard-room is in the Indian style. Magnificent panoplies unite Rajpoot shields, Mahratta scimitars, helmets with curtains of steel, rings belonging to Afghan chiefs, and long lances ornamented with white mares' tails, wielded by the horsemen of Cabul. The walls are

SERGE PANINE

painted from designs brought from Lahore. The panels of the doors were decorated by Gérôme. The great artist has painted Nautch girls twisting their floating scarves, and jugglers throwing poignards into the air. Around the room are low divans, covered with soft and brilliant Oriental cloth. The chandelier is quite original in form, being the exact representation of the god Vishnu. From the centre of the body hangs a lotus leaf of emeralds, and from each of the four arms is suspended a lamp shaped like a Hindu pagoda, which throws out a mellow light.

Madame Desvarennes was entertaining her visitors in these celebrated apartments that evening. Maréchal and Pierre had just come in, and were talking together near the fireplace. A few steps from them was a group, consisting of Cayrol, Madame Desvarennes, and a third person, who had never until then put his foot in the house, in spite of intercessions in his favor made by the banker to Madame Desvarennes. He was a tall, pale, thin man, whose skin seemed stretched on his bones, with a strongly developed under-jaw, like that of a ravenous animal, and eyes of indefinable color, always changing, and veiled behind golden-rimmed spectacles. His hands were soft and smooth, with moist palms and closely cut nails—vicious hands, made to take cunningly what they coveted. He had scanty hair, of a pale yellow, parted just above the ear, so as to enable him to brush it over the top of his head. This personage, clad in a double-breasted surtout, over a white waistcoat, and wearing a many-colored rosette, was called Hermann Herzog.

GEORGES OHNET

A daring financier, he had come from Luxembourg, preceded by a great reputation; and, in a few months, he had launched in Paris such a series of important affairs that the big-wigs on the Exchange felt bound to treat with him. There were many rumors current about him. Some said he was the most intelligent, most active, and most scrupulous of men that it was possible to meet. Others said that no greater scoundrel had ever dared the vengeance of the law, after plundering honest people. Of German nationality, those who cried him down said he was born at Mayence. Those who treated the rumors as legends said he was born at Frankfort, the most Gallic town beyond the river Rhine.

He had just completed an important line of railway from Morocco to the centre of our colony in Algeria, and now he was promoting a company for exporting grain and flour from America. Several times Cayrol had tried to bring Herzog and Madame Desvarennnes together. The banker had an interest in the grain and flour speculation, but he asserted that it would not succeed unless the mistress had a hand in it. Cayrol had a blind faith in the mistress's luck.

Madame Desvarennnes, suspicious of everything foreign, and perfectly acquainted with the rumors circulated respecting Herzog, had always refused to receive him. But Cayrol had been so importunate that, being quite tired of refusing, and, besides, being willing to favor Cayrol for having so discreetly managed the negotiations of Micheline's marriage, she had consented.

Herzog had just arrived. He was expressing to Ma-

SERGE PANINE

dame Desvarennes his delight at being admitted to her house. He had so often heard her highly spoken of that he had formed a high idea of her, but one which was, however, far below the reality; he understood now that it was an honor to be acquainted with her. He wheedled her with German grace, and with a German-Jewish accent, which reminds one of the itinerant merchants, who offer you with persistence "a goot pargain."

The mistress had been rather cold at first, but Herzog's amiability had thawed her. This man, with his slow speech and queer eyes, produced a fascinating effect on one like a serpent. He was repugnant, and yet, in spite of one's self one was led on. He had at once introduced the grain question, but in this he found himself face to face with the real Madame Desvarennes; and no politeness held good on her part when it was a question of business. From his first words, she had found a weak point in the plan, and had attacked him with such plainness that the financier, seeing his enterprise collapse at the sound of the mistress's voice—like the walls of Jericho at the sound of the Jewish trumpets—had beaten a retreat, and had changed the subject.

He was about to float a credit and discount company superior to any in the world. He would come back and talk with Madame Desvarennes about it, because she ought to participate in the large profits which the master promised. There was no risk. The novelty of the undertaking consisted in the concurrence of the largest banking-houses of France and abroad, which would hinder all competition, and prevent hostility on the

GEORGES OHNET

part of the great money-handlers. It was very curious, and Madame Desvarennes would feel great satisfaction in knowing the mechanism of this company, destined to become, from the first, the most important in the world, and yet most easy to understand.

Madame Desvarennes neither said "Yes" nor "No." Moved by the soft and insinuating talkativeness of Herzog, she felt herself treading on dangerous ground. It seemed to her that her foot was sinking, as in those dangerous peat-mosses of which the surface is covered with green grass, tempting one to run on it. Cayrol was under the charm. He drank in the German's words. This clever man, who had never till then been duped, had found his master in Herzog.

Pierre and Maréchal had come nearer, and Madame Desvarennes, profiting by this mingling of groups, introduced the men to each other. On hearing the name of Pierre Delarue, Herzog looked thoughtful, and asked if the young man was the renowned engineer whose works on the coast of Africa had caused so much talk in Europe? On Madame Desvarennes replying in the affirmative, he showered well-chosen compliments on Pierre. He had had the pleasure of meeting Delarue in Algeria, when he had gone over to finish the railroad in Morocco.

But Pierre had stepped back on learning that the constructor of that important line was before him.

"Ah! is it you, sir, who carried out that job?" said he. "Faith! you treated those poor Moors rather hardly!"

He remembered the misery of the poor natives em-

SERGE PANINE

ployed by Europeans who superintended the work. Old men, women, and children were placed at the disposal of the contractors by the native authorities, to dig up and remove the soil; and these poor wretches, crushed with hard work, and driven with the lash by drunken overseers—who commanded them with a pistol in hand—under a burning sun, inhaled the noxious vapors arising from the upturned soil, and died like flies. It was a terrible sight, and one that Pierre could not forget.

But Herzog, with his cajoling sweetness, protested against this exaggerated picture. Delarue had arrived during the dog-days—a bad time. And then it was necessary for the work to be carried on without delay. Besides, a few Moors, more or less—what did it matter? Negroes, all but monkeys!

Maréchal, who had listened silently until then, interrupted the conversation, to defend the monkeys in the name of Littré. He had framed a theory, founded on Darwin, and tending to prove that men who despised monkeys despised themselves. Herzog, a little taken aback by this unexpected reply, had looked at Maréchal slyly, asking himself if it was a joke. But, seeing Madame Desvarennes laugh, he recovered his self-possession. Business could not be carried on in the East as in Europe. And then, had it not always been thus? Had not all the great discoverers worked the countries which they discovered? Christopher Columbus, Cortez—had they not taken riches from the Indians, in exchange for the civilization which they brought them? He (Herzog) had, in making a railway in Morocco,

GEORGES OHNET

given the natives the means of civilizing themselves. It was only fair that it should cost them something.

Herzog uttered his tirade with all the charm of which he was capable; he looked to the right and to the left to notice the effect. He saw nothing but constrained faces. It seemed as if they were expecting some one or something. Time was passing; ten o'clock had just struck. From the little boudoir sounds of music were occasionally heard, when Micheline's nervous hand struck a louder chord on her piano. She was there, anxiously awaiting some one or something. Jeanne de Cernay, stretched in an easy-chair, her head leaning on her hand, was dreaming.

During the past three weeks the young girl had changed. Her bright wit no longer enlivened Micheline's indolent calmness; her brilliant eyes were surrounded by blue rings, which denoted nights passed without sleep. The change coincided strangely with Prince Panine's departure for England, and the sending of the letter which recalled Pierre to Paris. Had the inhabitants of the mansion been less occupied with their own troubles, they would no doubt have noticed this sudden change, and have sought to know the reason. But the attention of all was concentrated on the events which had already troubled them, and which would no doubt be yet more serious to the house, until lately so quiet.

The visitors' bell sounded, and caused Micheline to rise. The blood rushed to her cheeks. She whispered, "It is he!" and, hesitating, she remained a moment leaning on the piano, listening vaguely to the sounds in

SERGE PANINE

the drawing-room. The footman's voice announcing the visitor reached the young girls:

"Prince Panine."

Jeanne also rose then, and if Micheline had turned round she would have been frightened at the pallor of her companion. But Mademoiselle Desvarennes was not thinking of Mademoiselle de Cernay; she had just raised the heavy door curtain, and calling to Jeanne, "Are you coming?" passed into the drawing-room.

It was indeed Prince Serge, who was expected by Cayrol with impatience, by Madame Desvarennes with silent irritation, by Pierre with deep anguish. The handsome prince, calm and smiling, with white cravat and elegantly fitting dress-coat which showed off his fine figure, advanced toward Madame Desvarennes before whom he bowed. He seemed only to have seen Micheline's mother. Not a look for the two young girls or the men who were around him. The rest of the universe did not seem to count. He bent as if before a queen, with a dash of respectful adoration. He seemed to be saying:

"Here I am at your feet; my life depends on you; make a sign and I shall be the happiest of men or the most miserable."

Micheline followed him with eyes full of pride; she admired his haughty grace and his caressing humility. It was by these contrasts that Serge had attracted the young girl's notice. She felt herself face to face with a strange nature, different from men around her, and had become interested in him. Then he had spoken to her, and his sweet penetrating voice had touched her heart.

GEORGES OHNET

What he had achieved with Micheline he longed to achieve with her mother. After placing himself at the feet of the mother of her whom he loved, he sought the road to her heart. He took his place beside the mistress and spoke. He hoped that Madame Desvarennes would excuse the haste of his visit. The obedience which he had shown in going away must be a proof to her of his submission to her wishes. He was her most devoted and respectful servant. He resigned himself to anything she might exact of him.

Madame Desvarennes listened to that sweet voice; she had never heard it so full of charm. She understood what influence this sweetness had exercised over Micheline; she repented not having watched over her more carefully, and cursed the hour that had brought all this evil upon them. She was obliged, however, to answer him. The mistress went straight to the point. She was not one to beat about the bush when once her mind was made up.

"You come, no doubt, sir, to receive an answer to the request you addressed to me before your departure for England!"

The Prince turned slightly pale. The words which Madame Desvarennes was about to pronounce were of such importance to him that he could not help feeling moved. He answered, in a suppressed tone:

"I would not have dared to speak to you on the subject, Madame, especially in public; but since you anticipate my desire, I admit I am waiting with deep anxiety for one word from you which will decide my fate."

He continued bent before Madame Desvarennes like

SERGE PANINE

a culprit before his judge. The mistress was silent for a moment, as if hesitating before answering, and then said, gravely:

"That word I hesitated to pronounce, but some one in whom I have great confidence has advised me to receive you favorably."

"He, Madame, whoever he may be, has gained my everlasting gratitude."

"Show it to him," said Madame Desvarennes; "he is the companion of Micheline's young days, almost a son to me."

And turning toward Pierre, she pointed him out to Panine.

Serge took three rapid strides toward Pierre, but quick as he had been Micheline was before him. Each of the lovers seized a hand of Pierre, and pressed it with tender effusion. Panine, with his Polish impetuosity, was making the most ardent protestations to Pierre—he would be indebted to him for life.

Micheline's late betrothed, with despair in his heart, allowed his hands to be pressed and wrung in silence. The voice of her whom he loved brought tears to his eyes.

"How generous and good you are!" said the young girl, "how nobly you have sacrificed yourself!"

"Don't thank me," replied Pierre; "I have no merit in accomplishing what you admire. I am weak, you see, and I could not bear to see you suffer."

There was a great commotion in the drawing-room. Cayrol was explaining to Herzog, who was listening with great attention, what was taking place. Serge

GEORGES OHNET

Panine was to be Madame Desvarennes's son-in-law. It was a great event.

"Certainly," said the German; "Madame Desvarennes's son-in-law will become a financial power. And a Prince, too. What a fine name for a board of directors!"

The two financiers looked at each other for a moment; the same thought had struck them.

"Yes, but," replied Cayrol, "Madame Desvarennes will never allow Panine to take part in business."

"Who knows?" said Herzog. "We shall see how the marriage settlements are drawn up."

"But," cried Cayrol, "I would not have it said that I was leading Madame Desvarennes's son-in-law into speculations."

"Who is speaking of that?" replied Herzog, coldly. "Am I seeking shareholders? I have more money than I want; I refuse millions every day."

"Oh, I know capitalists run after you," said Cayrol, laughingly; "and to welcome them you affect the scruples of a pretty woman. But let us go and congratulate the Prince."

While Cayrol and Herzog were exchanging those few words which had such a considerable influence on the future of Serge Panine—a scene, terrible in its simplicity, was going on without being noticed. Micheline had thrown herself with a burst of tenderness into her mother's arms. Serge was deeply affected by the young girl's affection for him, when a trembling hand touched his arm. He turned round. Jeanne de Cernay was before him, pale and wan; her eyes sunken into her

SERGE PANINE

head like two black nails, and her lips tightened by a violent contraction. The Prince stood thunderstruck at the sight of her. He looked around him. Nobody was observing him. Pierre was beside Maréchal, who was whispering those words which only true friends can find in the sad hours of life. Madame Desvarennes was holding Micheline in her arms. Serge approached Mademoiselle de Cernay. Jeanne still fixed on him the same menacing look. He was afraid.

"Take care!" he said.

"Of what?" asked the young girl, with a troubled voice. "What have I to fear now?"

"What do you wish?" resumed Panine, with cold firmness, and with a gesture of impatience.

"I wish to speak with you immediately."

"You see that is impossible."

"I must."

Cayrol and Herzog approached. Serge smiled at Jeanne with a sign of the head which meant "Yes." The young girl turned away in silence, awaiting the fulfilment of the promise made.

Cayrol took her by the hand with tender familiarity.

"What were you saying to the happy man who has gained the object of his dreams, Mademoiselle? It is not to him you must speak, but to me, to give me hope. The moment is propitious; it is the day for betrothals. You know how much I love you; do me the favor of no longer repulsing me as you have done hitherto! If you would be kind, how charming it would be to celebrate the two weddings on the same day. One church, one ceremony, one splendid feast would unite two happy

GEORGES OHNET

couples. Is there nothing in this picture to entice you?"

"I am not easily enticed, as you know," said Jeanne, in a firm voice, trying to smile.

Micheline and Madame Desvarennnes had drawn near.

"Come, Cayrol," said Serge, in a tone of command; "I am happy to-day; perhaps I may succeed in your behalf as I have done in my own. Let me plead your cause with Mademoiselle de Cernay?"

"With all my heart. I need an eloquent pleader," sighed the banker, shaking his head sadly.

"And you, Mademoiselle, will you submit to the trial?" asked the Prince, turning toward Jeanne. "We have always been good friends, and I shall be almost a brother to you. This gives me some right over your mind and heart, it seems to me. Do you authorize me to exercise it?"

"As you like, sir," answered Jeanne, coldly. "The attempt is novel. Who knows? Perhaps it will succeed!"

"May Heaven grant it," said Cayrol. Then, approaching Panine:

"Ah! dear Prince, what gratitude I shall owe you! You know," added he in a whisper, "if you need a few thousand louis for wedding presents——"

"Go, go, corrupter!" replied Serge, with the same forced gayety; "you are flashing your money in front of us. You see it is not invincible, as you are obliged to have recourse to my feeble talents. But know that I am working for glory."

SERGE PANINE

And turning toward Madame Desvarennnes he added:
“I only ask a quarter of an hour.”

“Don’t defend yourself too much,” said Micheline in her companion’s ear, and giving her a tender kiss which the latter did not return.

“Come with me,” said Micheline to Pierre, offering him her arm; “I want to belong to you alone while Serge is pleading with Jeanne. I will be your sister as formerly. If you only knew how I love you !”

The large French window which led to the garden had just been opened by Maréchal, and the mild odors of a lovely spring night perfumed the drawing-room. They all went out on the lawn. Thousands of stars were twinkling in the sky, and the eyes of Micheline and Pierre were lifted toward the dark blue heavens seeking vaguely for the star which presided over their destiny. She, to know whether her life would be the long poem of love of which she dreamed; he, to ask whether glory, that exacting mistress for whom he had made so many sacrifices, would at least comfort him for his lost love.

CHAPTER VII

JEANNE'S SECRET



N the drawing-room Jeanne and Serge remained standing, facing each other. The mask had fallen from their faces; the forced smile had disappeared. They looked at each other attentively, like two duellists seeking to read each other's game, so that they may ward off the fatal stroke and prepare the decisive parry.

"Why did you leave for England three weeks ago, without seeing me and without speaking to me?"

"What could I have said to you?" replied the Prince, with an air of fatigue and dejection.

Jeanne flashed a glance brilliant as lightning:

"You could have told me that you had just asked for Micheline's hand!"

"That would have been brutal!"

"It would have been honest! But it would have necessitated an explanation, and you don't like explaining. You have preferred leaving me to guess this news from the acts of those around me, and the talk of strangers."

All these words had been spoken by Jeanne with feverish vivacity. The sentences were as cutting as strokes from a whip. The young girl's agitation was violent;

SERGE PANINE

her cheeks were red, and her breathing was hard and stifled with emotion. She stopped for a moment; then, turning toward the Prince, and looking him full in the face, she said:

“And so, this marriage is decided?”

Serge answered,

“Yes.”

It was fainter than a whisper. As if she could not believe it, Jeanne repeated:

“You are going to marry Micheline?”

And as Panine in a firmer voice answered again, “Yes!” the young girl took two rapid steps and brought her flushed face close to him.

“And I, then?” she cried with a violence she could no longer restrain.

Serge made a sign. The drawing-room window was still open, and from outside they could be heard.

“Jeanne, in mercy calm yourself,” replied he. “You are in a state of excitement.”

“Which makes you uncomfortable?” interrupted the young girl mockingly.

“Yes, but for your sake only,” said he, coldly.

“For mine?”

“Certainly. I fear your committing an imprudence which might harm you.”

“Yes; but you with me! And it is that only which makes you afraid.”

The Prince looked at Mademoiselle de Cernay, smilingly. Changing his tone, he took her hand in his.

“How naughty you are to-night! And what temper you are showing toward poor Serge! What an opinion

GEORGES OHNET

he will have of himself after your displaying such a flattering scene of jealousy!"

Jeanne drew away her hand.

"Ah, don't try to joke. This is not the moment, I assure you. You don't exactly realize your situation. Don't you understand that I am prepared to tell Madame Desvarennnes everything——"

"Everything!" said the Prince. "In truth, it would not amount to much. You would tell her that I met you in England; that I courted you, and that you found my attentions agreeable. And then? It pleases you to think too seriously of that midsummer night's dream under the great trees of Churchill Castle, and you reproach me for my errors! But what are they? Seriously, I do not see them! We lived in a noisy world, where we enjoyed the liberty which English manners allow to young people. Your aunt found no fault with the charming chatter which the English call flirtation. I told you I loved you; you allowed me to think that I was not displeasing to you. We, thanks to that delightful agreement, spent a most agreeable summer, and now you do not wish to put an end to that pleasant little excursion made beyond the limits drawn by our Parisian world, so severe, whatever people say about it. It is not reasonable, and it is imprudent. If you carry out your menacing propositions, and if you take my future mother-in-law as judge of the rights which you claim, don't you understand that you would be condemned beforehand? Her interests are directly opposed to yours. Could she hesitate between her daughter and you?"

SERGE PANINE

"Oh! your calculations are clever and your measures were well taken," replied Jeanne. "Still, if Madame Desvarennes were not the woman you think her——" Then, hesitating:

"If she took my part, and thinking that he who was an unloyal lover would be an unfaithful husband—she would augur of the future of her daughter by my experience; and what would happen?"

"Simply this," returned Serge. "Weary of the precarious and hazardous life which I lead, I would leave for Austria, and rejoin the service. A uniform is the only garb which can hide poverty honorably."

Jeanne looked at him with anguish; and making an effort said:

"Then, in any case, for me it is abandonment?"

And falling upon a seat, she hid her face in her hands. Panine remained silent for a moment. The young girl's grief, which he knew to be sincere, troubled him more than he wished to show. He had loved Mademoiselle de Cernay, and he loved her still. But he felt that a sign of weakness on his part would place him at Jeanne's mercy, and that an avowal from his lips at this grave moment meant a breaking-off of his marriage with Micheline. He hardened himself against his impressions, and replied, with insinuating sweetness:

"Why do you speak of desertion, when a good man who loves you fondly, and who possesses a handsome fortune, wishes to marry you?"

Mademoiselle de Cernay raised her head, hastily.

"So, it is you who advise me to marry Monsieur Cayrol? Is there nothing revolting to you in the idea that I

GEORGES OHNET

should follow your advice? But then, you deceived me from the first moment you spoke to me. You have never loved me even for a day! Not an hour!"

Serge smiled, and resuming his light, caressing tone, replied:

"My dear Jeanne, if I had a hundred thousand francs a year, I give you my word of honor that I would not marry another woman but you, for you would make an adorable Princess."

Mademoiselle de Cernay made a gesture of perfect indifference.

"Ah! what does the title matter to me?" she exclaimed, with passion. "What I want is you! Nothing but you!"

"You do not know what you ask. I love you far too much to associate you with my destiny. If you knew that gilded misery, that white kid-gloved poverty, which is my lot, you would be frightened, and you would understand that in my resolution to give you up there is much of tenderness and generosity. Do you think it is such an easy matter to give up a woman so adorable as you are? I resign myself to it, though.

"What could I do with my beautiful Jeanne in the three rooms in the Rue de Madame where I live? Could I, with the ten or twelve thousand francs which I receive through the liberality of the Russian Panines, provide a home? I can hardly make it do for myself. I live at the club, where I dine cheaply. I ride my friends' horses! I never touch a card, although I love play. I go much in society; I shine there, and walk home to save the cost of a carriage. My door-keeper

SERGE PANINE

cleans my rooms and keeps my linen in order. My private life is sad, dull, and humiliating. It is the black chrysalis of the bright butterfly which you know. That is what Prince Panine is, my dear Jeanne. A gentleman of good appearance, who lives as carefully as an old maid. The world sees him elegant and happy, and its envies his luxury; but this luxury is as deluding as watch-chains made of pinchbeck. You understand now that I cannot seriously ask you to share such an existence."

But if, with this sketch of his life, correctly described, Panine thought to turn the young girl against him, he was mistaken. He had counted without considering Jeanne's sanguine temperament, which would lead her to make any sacrifices to keep the man she adored.

"If you were rich, Serge," she said, "I would not have made an effort to bring you back to me. But you are poor and I have a right to tell you that I love you. Life with you would be all devotedness and self-denial. Each pain endured would be a proof of love, and that is why I wish to suffer. Your life with mine would be neither sad nor humiliated; I would make it sweet by my tenderness, and bright by my happiness. And we should be so happy that you would say, 'How could I ever have dreamed of anything else?'"

"Alas! Jeanne," replied the Prince; "it is a charming and poetic idyl which you present to me. We should flee far from the world, eh? We should go to an unknown spot and try to regain paradise lost. How long would that happiness last? A season during the spring-time of our youth. Then autumn would come, sad and

GEORGES OHNET

harsh. Our illusions would vanish like the swallows in romances, and we should find, with alarm, that we had taken the dream of a day for eternal happiness! Forgive my speaking plain words of disenchantment," added Serge, seeing Jeanne rising abruptly, "but our life is being settled at this moment. Reason alone should guide us."

"And I beseech you to be guided only by your heart," cried Mademoiselle de Cernay, seizing the hands of the Prince, and pressing them with her trembling fingers. "Remember that you loved me. Say that you love me still!"

Jeanne had drawn near to Serge. Her burning face almost touched his. Her eyes, bright with excitement, pleaded passionately for a tender look. She was most fascinating, and Panine, usually master of himself, lost his presence of mind for a moment. His arms encircled the shoulders of the adorable pleader, and his lips were buried in the masses of her dark hair.

"Serge!" cried Mademoiselle de Cernay, clinging to him whom she loved so fondly.

But the Prince was as quickly calmed as he had been carried away. He gently put Jeanne aside.

"You see," he said with a smile, "how unreasonable we are and how easily we might commit an irreparable folly. And yet our means will not allow us."

"In mercy do not leave me!" pleaded Jeanne, in a tone of despair. "You love me! I feel it; everything tells me so! And you would desert me because you are poor and I am not rich. Is a man ever poor when he has two arms? Work."

SERGE PANINE

The word was uttered by Jeanne with admirable energy. She possessed the courage to overcome every difficulty.

Serge trembled. For the second time he felt touched to the very soul by this strange girl. He understood that he must not leave her with the slightest hope of encouragement, but throw ice on the fire which was devouring her.

"My dear Jeanne," he said, with affectionate sweetness, "you are talking nonsense. Remember this, that for Prince Panine there are only three social conditions possible: to be rich, a soldier, or a priest. I have the choice. It is for you to decide."

This put an end to Mademoiselle de Cernay's resistance. She felt how useless was further argument, and falling on a sofa, crushed with grief, cried:

"Ah! this time it is finished; I am lost!"

Panine, then, approaching her, insinuating and supple, like the serpent with the first woman, murmured in her ear, as if afraid lest his words, in being spoken aloud, would lose their subtle venom:

"No, you are not lost. On the contrary, you are saved, if you will only listen to and understand me. What are we, you and I? You, a child adopted by a generous woman; I, a ruined nobleman. You live in luxury, thanks to Madame Desvarennes's liberality. I can scarcely manage to keep myself with the help of my family. Our present is precarious, our future hazardous. And, suddenly, fortune is within our grasp. We have only to stretch out our hands, and with one stroke we gain the uncontested power which money brings!"

GEORGES OHNET

Riches, that aim of humanity! Do you understand? We, the weak and disdained, become strong and powerful. And what is necessary to gain them? A flash of sense; a minute of wisdom; forget a dream and accept a reality."

Jeanne waited till he had finished. A bitter smile played on her lips. Henceforth she would believe in no one. After listening to what Serge had just said, she could listen to anything.

"So," said she, "the dream is love; the reality is interest. And is it you who speak thus to me? You, for whom I was prepared to endure any sacrifice! You, whom I would have served on my knees! And what reason do you give to justify your conduct? Money! Indispensable and stupid money! Nothing but money! But it is odious, infamous, low!"

Serge received this terrible broadside of abuse without flinching. He had armed himself against contempt, and was deaf to all insults. Jeanne went on with increasing rage:

"Micheline has everything: family, fortune, and friends, and she is taking away my one possession—your love. Tell me that you love her! It will be more cruel but less vile! But no, it is not possible! You gave way to temptation at seeing her so rich; you had a feeling of covetousness, but you will become yourself again and will act like an honest man. Think, that in my eyes you are dishonoring yourself! Serge, answer me!"

She clung to him again, and tried to regain him by her ardor, to warm him with her passion. He re-

SERGE PANINE

mained unmoved, silent, and cold. Her conscience rebelled.

"Well, then," said she, "marry her."

She remained silent and sullen, seeming to forget he was there. She was thinking deeply. Then she walked wildly up and down the room, saying:

"So, it is that implacable self-interest with which I have just come in contact, which is the law of the world, the watchword of society! So, in refusing to share the common folly, I risk remaining in isolation, and I must be strong to make others stand in awe of me. Very well, then, I shall henceforth act in such a manner as to be neither dupe nor victim. In future, everything will be self, and woe to him who hinders me. That is the morality of the age, is it not?"

And she laughed nervously.

"Was I not stupid? Come, Prince, you have made me clever. Many thanks for the lesson; it was difficult, but I shall profit by it."

The Prince, astonished at the sudden change, listened to Jeanne with stupor. He did not yet quite understand.

"What do you intend to do?" asked he.

Jeanne looked at him with a fiendish expression. Her eyes sparkled like stars; her white teeth shone between her lips.

"I intend," replied she, "to lay the foundation of my power, and to follow your advice, by marrying a millionaire!"

She ran to the window, and, looking out toward the shady garden, called:

GEORGES OHNET

“Monsieur Cayrol!”

Serge, full of surprise, and seized by a sudden fit of jealousy, went toward her as if to recall her.

“Jeanne,” said he, vaguely holding out his arms.

“Well! what is it?” she asked, with crushing haughtiness. “Are you frightened at having gained your cause so quickly?”

And as Serge did not speak:

“Come,” added she, “you will have a handsome fee; Micheline’s dower will be worth the trouble you have had.”

They heard Cayrol’s hurried steps ascending the stairs.

“You have done me the honor to call me, Mademoiselle,” said he, remaining on the threshold of the drawing-room. “Am I fortunate enough at length to have found favor in your eyes?”

“Here is my hand,” said Mademoiselle de Cernay, simply tendering him her white taper fingers, which he covered with kisses.

Madame Desvarennes had come in behind the banker. She uttered a joyous exclamation.

“Cayrol, you shall not marry Jeanne for her beauty alone. I will give her a dower.”

Micheline fell on her companion’s neck. It was a concert of congratulations. But Jeanne, with a serious air, led Cayrol aside:

“I wish to act honestly toward you, sir; I yield to the pleading of which I am the object. But you must know that my sentiments do not change so quickly. It is my hand only which I give you to-day.”

SERGE PANINE

"I have not the conceitedness to think that you love me, Mademoiselle," said Cayrol, humbly. "You give me your hand; it will be for me to gain your heart, and with time and sincere affection I do not despair of winning it. I am truly happy, believe me, for the favor you do me, and all my life long shall be spent in proving my gratitude to you."

Jeanne was moved; she glanced at Cayrol, and did not think him so common-looking as usual. She resolved to do all in her power to like this good man.

Serge, in taking leave of Madame Desvarennnes, said:

"In exchange for all the happiness which you give me, I have only my life to offer; accept it, Madame, it is yours."

The mistress looked at the Prince deeply; then, in a singular tone, said:

"I accept it; from to-day you belong to me."

Maréchal took Pierre by the arm and led him outside.

"The Prince has just uttered words which remind me of Antonio saying to the Jew in 'The Merchant of Venice': 'Thy ducats in exchange for a pound of my flesh.' Madame Desvarennnes loves her daughter with a more formidable love than Shylock had for his gold. The Prince will do well to be exact in his payments of the happiness which he has promised."

CHAPTER VIII

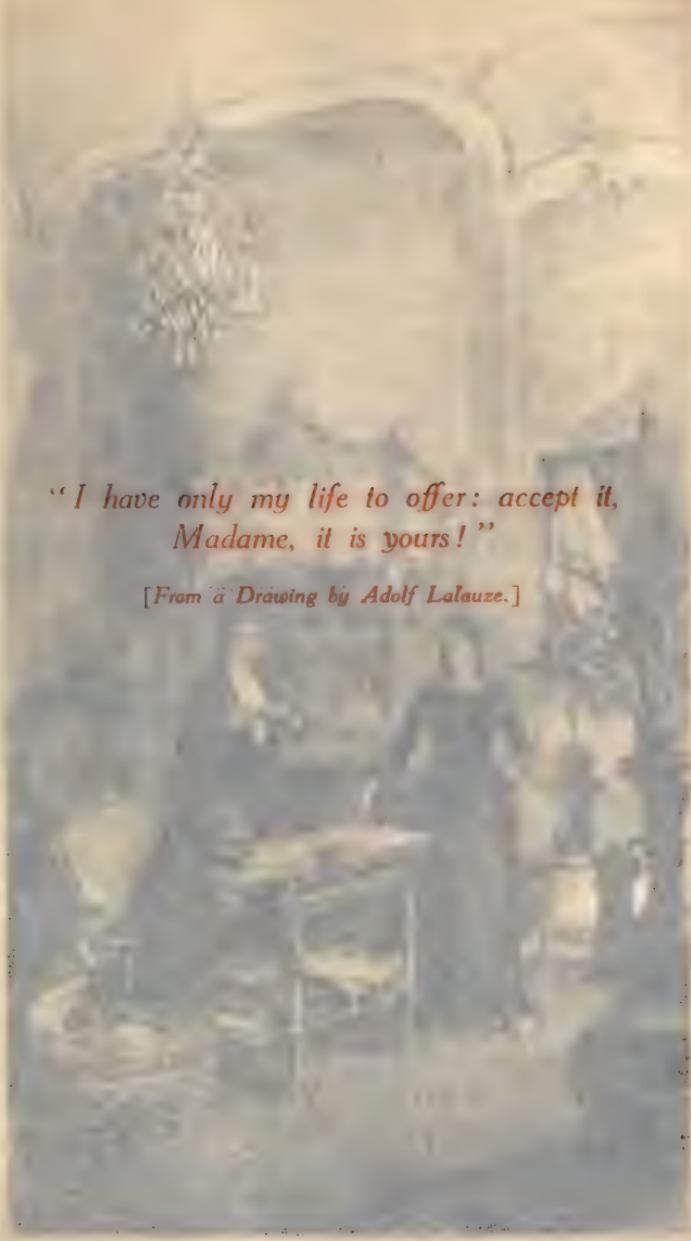
A PLEASANT UNDERSTANDING



HE day following this memorable evening, Pierre left for Algeria, notwithstanding the prayers of Madame Desvarennes who wished to keep him near her. He was going to finish his labors. He promised to return in time for the wedding. The mistress, wishing to give him some compensation, offered him the management of the mills at Jouy, saying:

“So that if you are not my son, you will be at least my partner. And if I do not leave you all my money at my death, I can enrich you during my life.”

Pierre would not accept. He would not have it said that in wishing to marry Micheline he had tried to make a speculation. He wished to leave that house where he had hoped to spend his life, empty-handed, so that no one could doubt that it was the woman he loved in Micheline and not the heiress. He had been offered a splendid appointment in Savoy as manager of some mines; he would find there at the same time profit and happiness, because there were interesting scientific studies to be made in order to enable him to carry on the work creditably. He resolved to throw himself heart



*"I have only my life to offer: accept it,
Madame, it is yours!"*

[From a Drawing by Adolf Lalauze.]

CHAPTER VIII

A PLEASANT ENCOUNTER.

The following day, while supping, Pierre left the room, notwithstanding the protests of Madame Desvarennes who wished to keep him near.
M. Labord illo et illi non plus que A. labors. "Vane is a complaint for the world," said he, "but, without ^{to A. Wale et son G. n'est pas mal}, I offer him the management of the mill at Jouy, saying:

"So that if you are not my son, you will be at least my partner. And if I do not leave you all my money at my death, I am worth you during my life."

This would not suffice. He would not have it said that by visiting an old maid Micheline he had made a speculation. He wished to leave that town where he had vowed to spend his life, empty-handed; so no one could doubt that it was the woman in Micheline and not the heiress. He had been offered a splendid appointment in Savoy at that time; indeed, he would find there at the same time wealth and happiness, because there were business interests to be made in order to make up for costs on Germany's neutrality. He resolved to return next



SERGE PANINE

and soul into the work and seek forgetfulness in study.

In the mansion of the Rue Saint-Dominique the marriage preparations were carried on with great despatch. On the one side the Prince, and on the other Cayrol, were eager for the day: the one because he saw the realization of his ambitious dreams, the other because he loved so madly. Serge, gracious and attentive, allowed himself to be adored by Micheline, who was never weary of listening to and looking at him whom she loved. It was a sort of delirium that had taken possession of the young girl. Madame Desvarennes looked on the metamorphosis in her child with amazement. The old Micheline, naturally indolent and cold, just living with the indolence of an odalisque stretched on silk cushions, had changed into a lively, loving sweetheart, with sparkling eyes and cheerful lips. Like those flowers which the sun causes to bloom and be fragrant, so Micheline under a look from Serge became animated and grown handsomer.

The mother looked on with bitterness; she spoke of this transformation in her child with ironical disdain. She was sure Micheline was not in earnest; only a doll was capable of falling in love so foolishly with a man for his personal beauty. For to her mind the Prince was as regards mental power painfully deficient. No sense, dumb as soon as the conversation took a serious turn, only able to talk dress like a woman, or about horses like a jockey. And it was such a person upon whom Micheline literally doted! The mistress felt humiliated; she dared not say anything to her daughter,

GEORGES OHNET

but she relieved herself in company of Maréchal, whose discretion she could trust, and whom she willingly called the tomb of her secrets.

Maréchal listened patiently to the confidences of Madame Desvarennes, and he tried to fight against the growing animosity of the mistress toward her future son-in-law. Not that he liked the Prince—he was too much on Pierre's side to be well disposed toward Panine; but with his good sense he saw that Madame Desvarennes would find it advantageous to overcome her feeling of dislike. And when the mistress, so formidable toward everybody except her daughter, cried with rage:

"That Micheline! I have just seen her again in the garden, hanging on the arm of that great lanky fellow, her eyes fixed on his like a lark fascinated by a looking-glass. What on earth has happened to her that she should be in such a state?"

Maréchal interrupted her gently.

"All fair people are like that," he affirmed with ironical gayety. "You cannot understand it, Madame; you are dark."

Then Madame Desvarennes became angry.

"Be quiet," she said, "you are stupid! She ought to have a shower-bath! She is mad!"

As for Cayrol he lived in ecstasy, like an Italian kneeling before a madonna. He had never been so happy; he was overwhelmed with joy. Until then, he had only thought of business matters. To be rich was the aim of his life; and now he was going to work for happiness. It was all pleasure for him. He was not *blasé*; he

SERGE PANINE

amused himself like a child, adorning the rooms which were to be occupied by Jeanne. To his mind nothing was too expensive for the temple of his goddess, as he said, with a loud laugh which lighted up his whole face. And when he spoke of his love's future nest, he exclaimed, with a voluptuous shiver:

"It is charming; a veritable little paradise!" Then the financier shone through all, and he added:

"And I know what it costs!"

But he did not grudge his money. He knew he would get the interest of it back. On one subject he was anxious—Mademoiselle de Cernay's health. Since the day of their engagement, Jeanne had become more serious and dull. She had grown thin and her eyes were sunken as if she wept in secret. When he spoke of his fears to Madame Desvarennes, the latter said:

"These young girls are so senseless. The notion of marriage puts them in such an incomprehensible state! Look at my daughter. She chatters like a magpie and skips about like a kid. She has two glow-worms under her eyelids! As to Jeanne, that's another affair; she has the matrimonial melancholy, and has the air of a young victim. Leave them alone; it will all come right. But you must admit that the gayety of the one is at least as irritating as the languor of the other!"

Cayrol, somewhat reassured by this explanation, and thinking, like her, that it was the uncertainties of marriage which were troubling Jeanne, no longer attached any importance to her sad appearance. Micheline and Serge isolated themselves completely. They fled to the garden as soon as any one ventured into the drawing-

GEORGES OHNET

room to interrupt their tête-à-tête. If visitors came to the garden they took refuge in the conservatory.

This manœuvre pleased Serge, because he always felt uncomfortable in Jeanne's presence. Mademoiselle de Cernay had a peculiar wrinkle on her brow whenever she saw Micheline passing before her hanging on the arm of the Prince, which tormented him. They were obliged to meet at table in the evening, for Serge and Cayrol dined at the Rue Saint-Dominique. The Prince talked in whispers to Micheline, but every now and then he was obliged to speak to Jeanne. These were painful moments to Serge. He was always in dread of some outburst, knowing her ardent and passionate nature. Thus, before Jeanne, he made Micheline behave in a less demonstrative manner. Mademoiselle Desvarennes was proud of this reserve, and thought it was tact and good breeding on the part of the Prince, without doubting that what she thought reserve in the man of the world was the prudence of an anxious lover.

Jeanne endured the tortures of Hades. Too proud to say anything after the explanation she had had with Serge, too much smitten to bear calmly the sight of her rival's happiness, she saw draw near with deep horror the moment when she would belong to the man whom she had determined to marry although she did not love him. She once thought of breaking off the engagement; as she could not belong to the man whom she adored, at least she could belong to herself. But the thought of the struggle she would have to sustain with those who surrounded her, stopped her. What would she do at Madame Desvarennes's? She would have to witness

SERGE PANINE

the happiness of Micheline and Serge. She would rather leave the house.

With Cayrol at least she could go away; she would be free, and perhaps the esteem which she would surely have for her husband would do instead of love. Sisterly or filial love, in fact the least affection, would satisfy the poor man, who was willing to accept anything from Jeanne. And she would not have that group of Serge and Micheline before her eyes, always walking round the lawn and disappearing arm in arm down the narrow walks. She would not have the continual murmur of their love-making in her ears, a murmur broken by the sound of kisses when they reached shady corners.

One evening, when Serge appeared in the little drawing-room of the Rue Saint-Dominique, he found Madame Desvarennes alone. She looked serious, as if some important business were pending. She stood before the fireplace; her hands crossed behind her back like a man. Apparently, she had sought to be alone. Cayrol, Jeanne, and Micheline were in the garden. Serge felt uneasy. He had a presentiment of trouble. But determined to make the best of it, whatever it might be, he looked pleasant and bowed to Madame Desvarennes, without his face betraying his uneasiness.

"Good-day, Prince; you are early this evening, though not so early as Cayrol; but then he does not quite know what he is doing now. Sit down, I want to talk to you. You know that a young lady like Mademoiselle Desvarennes cannot get married without her engagement being much talked about. Tongues have been very busy, and pens too. I have heard a lot of

GEORGES OHNET

scandal and have received heaps of anonymous letters about you."

Serge gave a start of indignation.

"Don't be uneasy," continued the mistress. "I did not heed the tales, and I burned the letters. Some said you were a dissolute man, capable of anything to gain your object. Others insinuated that you were not a Prince, that you were not a Pole, but the son of a Russian coachman and a little dressmaker of Les Ternes; that you had lived at the expense of Mademoiselle Anna Monplaisir, the star of the Variétés Théâtre, and that you were bent on marrying to pay your debts with my daughter's money."

Panine, pale as death, rose up and said, in a stifled voice:

"Madame!"

"Sit down, my dear child," interrupted the mistress. "If I tell you these things, it is because I have the proofs that they are untrue. Otherwise, I would not have given myself the trouble to talk to you about them. I would have shown you the door and there would have been an end of it. Certainly, you are not an angel; but the peccadillos which you have been guilty of are those which one forgives in a son, and which in a son-in-law makes some mothers smile. You are a Prince, you are handsome, and you have been loved. You were then a bachelor; and it was your own affair. But now, you are going to be, in about ten days, the husband of my daughter, and it is necessary for us to make certain arrangements. Therefore, I waited to see you, to speak of your wife, of yourself, and of me."

SERGE PANINE

What Madame Desvarennnes had just said relieved Serge of a great weight. He felt so happy that he resolved to do everything in his power to please the mother of his betrothed.

"Speak, Madame," he exclaimed. "I am listening to you with attention and confidence. I am sure that from you I can only expect goodness and sense."

The mistress smiled.

"Oh, I know you have a gilt tongue, my handsome friend, but I don't pay myself with words, and I am not easy to be wheedled."

"Faith," said Serge, "I won't deceive you. I will try to please you with all my heart."

Madame Desvarennnes's face brightened as suddenly at these words as a landscape, wrapped in a fog, which is suddenly lighted up by the sun.

"Then we shall understand each other," she said. "For the last fortnight we have been busy with marriage preparations, and have not been able to think or reason. Everybody is rambling about here. Still, we are commencing a new life, and I think it is as well to lay the foundation. I seem to be drawing up a contract, eh? What can I do? It is an old business habit. I like to know how I stand."

"I think it is quite right. I think, too, that you have acted with great delicacy in not imposing your conditions upon me before giving your consent."

"Has that made you feel better disposed toward me? So much the better!" said the mistress. "Because you know that I depend on my daughter, who will hence-

GEORGES OHNET

forth depend on you, and it is to my interest that I should be in your good graces."

In pronouncing these words with forced cheerfulness, Madame Desvarennes's voice trembled slightly. She knew what an important game she was playing, and wished to win it at any price.

"You see," continued she, "I am not an easy woman to deal with. I am a little despotic, I know. I have been in the habit of commanding during the last thirty-five years. Business was heavy, and required a strong will. I had it, and the habit is formed. But this strong will, which has served me so well in business will, I am afraid, with you, play me some trick. Those who have lived with me a long time know that if I am hot-headed I have a good heart. They submit to my tyranny; but you who are a newcomer, how will you like it?"

"I shall do as the others do," said Serge, simply. "I shall be led, and with pleasure. Think that I have lived for years without kindred, without ties—at random; and, believe me, any chain will be light and sweet which holds me to any one or anything. And then," frankly added he, changing his tone and looking at Madame Desvarennes with tenderness, "if I did not do everything to please you I should be ungrateful."

"Oh!" cried Madame Desvarennes, "unfortunately that is not a reason."

"Would you have a better one?" said the young man, in his most charming accent. "If I had not married your daughter for her own sake, I believe that I should have married her for yours."

SERGE PANINE

Madame Desvarennes was quite pleased, and shaking her finger threateningly at Serge, said:

"Ah, you Pole, you boaster of the North!"

"Seriously," continued Serge, "before I knew I was to be your son-in-law, I thought you a matchless woman. Add to the admiration I had for your great qualities the affection which your goodness has inspired, and you will understand that I am both proud and happy to have such a mother as you."

Madame Desvarennes looked at Panine attentively; she saw he was sincere. Then, taking courage, she touched the topic of greatest interest to her.

"If that is the case, you will have no objections to live with me?" She stopped; then emphasized the words, "With me."

"But was not that understood?" asked Serge, gayly. "I thought so. You must have seen that I have not been seeking a dwelling for my wife and myself. If you had not made the offer to me, I should have asked you to let me stay with you."

Madame Desvarennes broke into such an outburst of joy that she astonished Panine. It was then only that in that pallor, in that sudden trembling, in that changed voice, he understood the immensity of the mother's love for her daughter.

"I have everything to gain by that arrangement," continued he. "My wife will be happy at not leaving you, and you will be pleased at my not having taken away your daughter. You will both like me better, and that is all I wish."

"How good you are in deciding thus, and how I

GEORGES OHNET

thank you for it," resumed Madame Desvarennes. "I feared you would have ideas of independence."

"I should have been happy to sacrifice them to you, but I have not even that merit."

All that Serge had said had been so open and plain, and expressed with such sweetness that, little by little, Madame Desvarennes's prejudices disappeared. He took possession of her as he had done of Micheline, and as he did of every one whom he wished to conquer. His charm was irresistible. He seized on one by the eyes and the ears. Naturally fascinating, moving, captivating, bold, he always preserved his artless and tender ways, which made him resemble a young girl.

"I am going to tell you how we shall manage," said the mistress. "Foreseeing my daughter's marriage, I have had my house divided into two distinct establishments. They say that life in common with a mother-in-law is objectionable to a son-in-law, therefore I wish you to have a home of your own. I know that an old face like mine frightens young lovers. I will come to you when you invite me. But even when I am shut up in my own apartments I shall be with my daughter; I shall breathe the same air; I shall hear her going and coming, singing, laughing, and I shall say to myself—'It is all right, she is happy.' That is all I ask. A little corner, whence I can share her life."

Serge took her hand with effusion.

"Don't be afraid; your daughter will not leave you."

Madame Desvarennes, unable to contain her feelings, opened her arms, and Serge fell on her breast, like a true son.

SERGE PANINE

"Do you know, I am going to adore you!" cried Madame Desvarennes, showing Panine a face beaming with happiness.

"I hope so," said the young man, gayly.

Madame Desvarennes became thoughtful.

"What a strange thing life is!" resumed she. "I did not want you for a son-in-law, and now you are behaving so well toward me that I am full of remorse. Oh, I see now what a dangerous man you are, if you captivate other women's hearts as you have caught mine."

She looked at the Prince fixedly, and added, in her clear commanding voice, with a shade of gayety:

"Now, I hope you will reserve all your powers of charming for my daughter. No more flirting, eh? She loves you; she would be jealous, and you would get into hot water with me! Let Micheline's life be happy, without a cloud—blue, always blue sky!"

"That will be easy," said Serge. "To be unhappy I should have to seek misfortune; and I certainly shall not do that."

He began to laugh.

"Besides, your good friends who criticised so when you gave me Micheline's hand would be only too pleased. I will not give them the pleasure of posing as prophets and saying—'We knew it would be so!'"

"You must forgive them," replied Madame Desvarennes. "You have made enemies. Without speaking of projects which I had formed, I may say that my daughter has had offers from the best folks in Paris; from first-rate firms! Our circle was rather indignant.

GEORGES OHNET

People said: ‘Oh, Madame Desvarennnes wanted her daughter to be a Princess. We shall see how it will turn out. Her son-in-law will spend her money and spurn her.’ The gossip of disappointed people. Give them the lie; manage that we shall all live together, and we shall be right against the world.”

“Do you hope it will be so?”

“I am sure of it,” answered the mistress, affectionately pressing the hand of her future son-in-law.

Micheline entered, anxious at the long interview between Serge and her mother. She saw them hand in hand. She uttered a joyful cry, and threw her arms caressingly round her mother’s neck.

“Well! you are agreed?” she said, making a gracious sign to Serge.

“He has been charming,” replied Madame Desvarennnes, whispering in her daughter’s ear. “He agrees to live in this house, and that quite gracefully. There, child, this is the happiest moment I’ve had since your engagement. I admit that I regret nothing.”

Then, resuming aloud:

“We will leave to-morrow for Cernay, where the marriage shall take place. I shall have to order the workmen in here to get ready for your reception. Besides the wedding will be more brilliant in the country. We shall have all the workpeople there. We will throw the park open to the countryside; it will be a grand fête. For we are lords of the manor there,” added she, with pride.

“You are right, mamma; it will be far better,” exclaimed Micheline. And taking Serge by the hand,

SERGE PANINE

"Come, let us go," said she, and led him into the garden.

And amid the sweet-smelling shrubs they resumed their walk, always the same yet ever new, their arms twined round each other, the young girl clinging to him whom she loved, and he looking fondly at her, and with caressing voice telling her the oft-told tale of love which she was never tired of hearing, and which always filled her with thrills of joy.

CHAPTER IX

THE DOUBLE MARRIAGE



HE Château of Cernay is a vast and beautiful structure of the time of Louis XIII. A walled park of a hundred acres surrounds it, with trees centuries old. A white painted gate separates the avenue from the road leading to Pontoise by way of Conflans. A carpet of grass, on which carriages roll as if on velvet, leads up to the park gates. Before reaching it there is a stone bridge which spans the moat of running water. A lodge of stone, faced with brick, with large windows, rises at each corner of this space.

The château, surrounded by cleverly arranged trees, stands in the centre, on a solid foundation of red granite from the Jura. A splendid double staircase leads to the ground floor as high as an *entresol*. A spacious hall, rising to the roof of the building, lighted by a window filled with old stained glass, first offers itself to the visitor. A large organ, by Cavallié-Col, rears its long brilliant pipes at one end of the hall to a level with the gallery of sculptured wood running round and forming a balcony on the first floor. At each corner is a knight in armor, helmet on head, and lance in hand, mounted

SERGE PANINE

on a charger, and covered with the heavy trappings of war. Cases full of objects of art of great value, bookshelves containing all the new books, are placed along the walls. A billiard-table and all sorts of games are lodged under the vast staircase. The broad bays which give admission to the reception-rooms and grand staircase are closed by tapestry of the fifteenth century, representing hunting scenes. Long cords of silk and gold loop back these marvellous hangings in the Italian style. Thick carpets, into which the feet sink, deaden the sound of footsteps. Spacious divans, covered with Oriental materials, are placed round the room.

Over the chimney-piece, which is splendidly carved in woodwork, is a looking-glass in the Renaissance style, with a bronze and silver frame, representing grinning fawns and dishevelled nymphs. Benches are placed round the hearth, which is large enough to hold six people. Above the divans, on the walls, are large oil-paintings by old masters. An "Assumption," by Jordaens, which is a masterpiece; "The Gamesters," by Valentin; "A Spanish Family on Horseback," painted by Velasquez; and the marvel of the collection—a "Holy Family," by Francia, bought in Russia. Then, lower down, "A Young Girl with a Canary," by Metzu; a "Kermesse," by Braurver, a perfect treasure, glitter, like the gems they are, in the midst of panoplies, between the high branches of palm-trees planted in enormous delft vases. A mysterious light filters into that fresh and picturesque apartment through the stained-glass windows.

GEORGES OHNET

From the hall the left wing is reached, where the reception-rooms are, and one's eyes are dazzled by the brightness which reigns there. It is like coming out from a cathedral into broad daylight. The furniture, of gilt wood and Genoese velvet, looks very bright. The walls are white and gold; and flowers are everywhere. At the end is Madame Desvarennes's bedroom, because she does not like mounting stairs, and lives on the ground floor. Adjoining it is a conservatory, furnished as a drawing-room, and serving as a boudoir for the mistress of the house.

The dining-room, the gun-room, and the smoking-room are in the right wing. The gun-room deserves a particular description. Four glass cases contain guns of every description and size of the best English and French manufacture. All the furniture is made of stags' horns, covered with fox-skins and wolf-skins. A large rug, formed by four bears' skins, with menacing snouts, showing their white teeth at the four corners, is in the centre of the room. On the walls are four paintings by Princeteau, admirably executed, and representing hunting scenes. Low couches, wide as beds, covered with gray cloth, invite the sportsmen to rest. Large dressing-rooms, fitted up with hot and cold water, invite them to refresh themselves with a bath. Everything has been done to suit the most fastidious taste. The kitchens are underground.

On the first story are the principal rooms. Twelve bedrooms, with dressing-rooms, upholstered in chintz of charming design. From these, a splendid view of the park and country beyond may be obtained. In the

SERGE PANINE

foreground is a piece of water, bathing, with its rapid current, the grassy banks which border the wood, while the low-lying branches of the trees dip into the flood, on which swans, dazzlingly white, swim in stately fashion. Beneath an old willow, whose drooping boughs form quite a vault of pale verdure, a squadron of multi-colored boats remain fastened to the balustrade of a landing stage. Through an opening in the trees you see in the distance fields of yellow corn, and in the near background, behind a row of poplars, ever moving like a flash of silver lightning, the Oise flows on between its low banks.

This sumptuous dwelling, on the evening of the 14th of July, was in its greatest splendor. The trees of the park were lit up by brilliant Venetian lanterns; little boats glided on the water of the lake carrying musicians whose notes echoed through the air. Under a marquée, placed midway in the large avenue, the country lads and lasses were dancing with spirit, while the old people, more calm, were seated under the large trees enjoying the ample fare provided. A tremendous uproar of gayety reëchoed through the night, and the sound of the cornet attracted the people to the ball.

It was nine o'clock. Carriages were fast arriving with guests for the mansion. In the centre of the handsome hall, illuminated with electric light, stood Madame Desvarennes in full dress, having put off black for one day, doing honor to the arrivals. Behind her stood Maréchal and Savinien, like two aides-de-camp, ready, at a sign, to offer their arms to the ladies, to conduct them to the drawing-rooms. The gathering was nu-

GEORGES OHNET

merous. Merchant-princes came for Madame Desverrennes's sake; bankers for Cayrol's; and the aristocrats and foreign nobility for the Prince's. An assemblage as opposed in ideas as in manners: some valuing only money, others high birth; all proud and elbowing each other with haughty assurance, speaking ill of each other and secretly jealous.

There were heirs of dethroned kings; princes without portions, who were called Highness, and who had not the income of their fathers' former chamberlains; millionaires sprung from nothing, who made a great show and who would have given half of their possessions for a single quartering of the arms of these great lords whom they affected to despise.

Serge and Cayrol went from group to group; the one with his graceful and delicate elegance; the other with heavy good-humor, radiant and elated by the consciousness of his triumphs. Herzog had just arrived, accompanied by his daughter, a charming girl of sixteen, to whom Maréchal had offered his arm. A whispering was heard when Herzog passed. He was accustomed to the effect which he produced in public, and quite calmly congratulated Cayrol.

Serge had just introduced Micheline to Count Soutzko, a gray-haired old gentleman of military appearance, whose right sleeve was empty. He was a veteran of the Polish wars, and an old friend of Prince Panine's, at whose side he had received the wounds which had so frightfully mutilated him. Micheline, smiling, was listening to flattering tales which the old soldier was relating about Serge. Cayrol, who had got rid of Herzog,

SERGE PANINE

was looking for Jeanne, who had just disappeared in the direction of the terrace.

The rooms were uncomfortably warm, and many of the visitors had found their way to the terraces. Along the marble veranda, overlooking the lake, chairs had been placed. The ladies, wrapped in their lace scarfs, had formed into groups and were enjoying the delights of the beautiful evening. Bursts of subdued laughter came from behind fans, while the gentlemen talked in whispers. Above all this whispering was heard the distant sound of the cornet at the peasants' ball.

Leaning over the balustrade, in a shady corner, far from the noise which troubled him and far from the fête which hurt him, Pierre was dreaming. His eyes were fixed on the illuminations in the park, but he did not see them. He thought of his vanished hopes. Another was beloved by Micheline, and in a few hours he would take her away, triumphant and happy. A great sadness stole over the young man's spirit; he was disgusted with life and hated humanity. What was to become of him now? His life was shattered; a heart like his could not love twice, and Micheline's image was too deeply engraven on it for it ever to be effaced. Of what use was all the trouble he had taken to raise himself above others? A worthless fellow had passed that way and Micheline had yielded to him. Now it was all over!

And Pierre asked himself if he had not taken a wrong view of things, and if it was not the idle and good-for-nothing fellows who were more prudent than he. To waste his life in superhuman works, to tire his mind in seeking to solve great problems, and to attain old age with-

GEORGES OHNET

out other satisfaction than unproductive honors and mercenary rewards. Those who only sought happiness and joy—epicureans who drive away all care, all pain, and only seek to soften their existence, and brighten their horizon—were they not true sages? Death comes so quickly! And it is with astonishment that one perceives when the hour is at hand, that one has not lived! Then the voice of pride spoke to him: what is a man who remains useless, and does not leave one trace of his passage through the world by works or discoveries? And, in a state of fever, Pierre said to himself:

“I will throw myself heart and soul into science; I will make my name famous, and I will make that ungrateful child regret me. She will see the difference between me and him whom she has chosen. She will understand that he is nobody, except by her money, whereas she would have been all by me.”

A hand was placed on his shoulder; and Maréchal’s affectionate voice said to him:

“Well! what are you doing here, gesticulating like that?”

Pierre turned round.

Lost in his thoughts he had not heard his friend approaching.

“All our guests have arrived,” continued Maréchal. “I have only just been able to leave them and to come to you. I have been seeking you for more than a quarter of an hour. You are wrong to hide yourself; people will make remarks. Come toward the house; it is as well to show yourself a little; people might imagine things which they must not imagine.”

SERGE PANINE

"Eh! let them think what they like; what does it matter to me?" said Pierre, sadly. "My life is a blank."

"Your life may be a blank; but it is your duty not to let any one perceive it. Imitate the young Spartan, who smiled although the fox, hidden under his cloak, was gnawing his vitals. Let us avoid ridicule, my friend. In society there is nothing that provokes laughter more than a disappointed lover, who rolls his eyes about and looks woe-begone. And, then, you see, suffering is a human law; the world is an arena, life is a conflict. Material obstacles, moral griefs, all hinder and overwhelm us. We must go on, though, all the same, and fight. Those who give in are trodden down! Come, pull yourself together!"

"And for whom should I fight now? A moment ago I was making projects, but I was a fool! All hope and ambition are dead in me."

"Ambition will return, you may be sure! At present you are suffering from weariness of mind; but your strength will return. As to hope, one must never despair."

"What can I expect in the future?"

"What? Why, everything! In this world all sorts of things happen!" said Maréchal, gayly. "Who is to prove that the Princess will not be a widow soon?"

Pierre could not help laughing and said,

"Come, don't talk such nonsense!"

"My dear fellow," concluded Maréchal, "in life it is only nonsense that is common-sense. Come and smoke a cigar."

They traversed several groups of people and bent

GEORGES OHNET

their steps in the direction of the château. The Prince was advancing toward the terrace, with an elegantly dressed and beautiful woman on his arm. Savinien, in the midst of a circle of dandies, was picking the passers-by to pieces in his easy-going way. Pierre and Maréchal came behind these young men without being noticed.

"Who is that hanging on the arm of our dear Prince?" asked a little fat man, girt in a white satin waistcoat, and a spray of white lilac in his buttonhole.

"Eh! Why, Le Brède, my boy, you don't know anything!" cried Savinien in a bantering, jocose tone.

"Because I don't know that lovely fair woman?" said Le Brède, in a piqued voice. "I don't profess to know the names of all the pretty women in Paris!"

"In Paris? That woman from Paris? You have not looked at her. Come, open your eyes. Pure English style, my friend."

The dandies roared with laughter. They had at once recognized the pure English style. They were not men to be deceived. One of them, a tall, dark fellow, named Du Tremblays, affected an aggrieved air, and said:

"Le Brède, my dear fellow, you make us blush for you!"

The Prince passed, smiling and speaking in a low voice to the beautiful Englishwoman, who was resting the tips of her white gloved fingers on her cavalier's arm.

"Who is she?" inquired Le Brède, impatiently.

"Eh, my dear fellow, it is Lady Harton, a cousin of

SERGE PANINE

the Prince. She is extremely rich, and owns a district in London."

"They say that a year ago she was very kind to Serge Panine," added Du Tremblays, confidentially.

"Why did he not marry her, then, since she is so rich? He has been quite a year in the market, the dear Prince."

"She is married."

"Oh, that is a good reason. But where is her husband?"

"Shut up in a castle in Scotland. Nobody ever sees him. He is out of his mind; and is surrounded by every attention."

"And a strait-waistcoat! Then why does not this pretty woman get a divorce?"

"The money belongs to the husband."

"Really!"

Pierre and Maréchal had listened, in silence, to this cool and yet terrible conversation. The group of young men dispersed. The two friends looked at each other. Thus, then, Serge Panine was judged by his companions in pleasure, by the frequenters of the clubs in which he had spent a part of his existence. The Prince being "in the market" was obliged to marry a rich woman. He could not marry Lady Harton, so he had sought Micheline. And the sweet child was the wife of such a man! And what could be done? She loved him!

Madame Desvarennes and Micheline appeared on the terrace. Lady Harton pointed to the bride with her fan. The Prince, leaving his companion, advanced toward Micheline.

"One of my English relatives, a Polish lady, mar-

GEORGES OHNET

ried to Lord Harton, wishes to be introduced to you," said Serge. "Are you agreeable?"

"With all my heart," replied the young wife, looking lovingly at her husband. "All who belong to you are dear to me, you know."

The beautiful Englishwoman approached slowly.

"The Princess Panine!" said Serge, gravely, introducing Micheline, who bowed gracefully. Then, with a shade of familiarity: "Lady Harton!" continued he, introducing his relative.

"I am very fond of your husband, Madame," said the Englishwoman. "I hope you will allow me to love you also; and I beg you to grant me the favor of accepting this small remembrance."

While speaking, she unfastened from her wrist a splendid bracelet with the inscription, *Semper*.

Serge frowned and looked stern. Micheline, lowering her eyes, and awed by the Englishwoman's grandeur, timidly said:

"I accept it, Madame, as a token of friendship."

"I think I recognize this bracelet, Madame," observed Serge.

"Yes; you gave it to me," replied Lady Harton, quietly. "*Semper*—I beg your pardon, Madame, we Poles all speak Latin—*Semper* means 'Always!' It is a great word. On your wife's arm this bracelet will be well placed. *Au revoir*, dear Prince. I wish you every happiness."

And bowing to Micheline with a regal bow, Lady Harton took the arm of a tall young man whom she had beckoned, and walked away.

SERGE PANINE

Micheline, amazed, looked at the bracelet sparkling on her white wrist. Without uttering a word Serge unfastened it, took it off his wife's arm, and advancing on the terrace, with a rapid movement flung it in the water. The bracelet gleamed in the night-air and made a brilliant splash; then the water resumed its tranquillity. Micheline, astonished, looked at Serge, who came toward her, and very humbly said:

"I beg your pardon."

The young wife did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears; a smile brightened her lips, and hurriedly taking his arm, she led him into the drawing-room.

Dancing was going on there. The young ladies of Pontoise, and the cream of Creil, had come to the fête, bent on not losing such an opportunity of enjoying themselves. Under the watchful eyes of their mothers, who, decked out in grand array, were seated along the walls, they were gamboling, in spite of the stifling heat, with all the impetuosity of young provincials habitually deprived of the pleasures of the ballroom. Crossing the room, Micheline and Serge reached Madame Desvarennes's boudoir.

It was delightfully cool in there. Cayrol had taken refuge there with Jeanne, and Mademoiselle Susanne Herzog. This young girl felt uncomfortable at being a third party with the newly-married couple, and welcomed the arrival of the Prince and Micheline with pleasure. Her father had left her for a moment in Cayrol's care; but she had not seen him for more than an hour.

"Mademoiselle," said the Prince, gayly, "a little

GEORGES OHNET

while ago, when I was passing through the rooms, I heard these words: 'Loan, discount, liquidation.' Your father must have been there. Shall I go and seek him?"

"I should be very grateful," said the young girl.

"I will go."

And turning lightly on his heels, happy to escape Jeanne's looks, Serge reentered the furnace. At once he saw Herzog seated in the corner of a bay-window with one of the principal stock-brokers of Paris. He was speaking. The Prince went straight up to him.

"Sorry to draw you away from the sweets of conversation," said he, smiling; "but your daughter is waiting for you, and is anxious at your not coming."

"Faith! My daughter, yes. I will come and see you to-morrow," said he to his companion. "We will talk over this association: there is much to be gained by it."

The other, a man with a bloated face, and fair Dunderdry whiskers, was eager to do business with him. Certainly the affair was good.

"Oh, my dear Prince, I am happy to be alone with you for a moment!" said Herzog, with that familiarity which was one of his means of becoming intimate with people. "I was going to compliment you! What a splendid position you have reached."

"Yes; I have married a charming woman," replied the Prince, coldly.

"And what a fortune!" insisted the financier. "Ah, it is worthy of the lot of a great lord such as you are! Oh, you are like those masterpieces of art which need a splendidly carved frame! Well, you have your frame, and well gilt too!"

SERGE PANINE

He laughed and seemed pleased at Serge's happiness. He had taken one of his hands and was patting it softly between his own.

"Not a very 'convenient' mother-in-law, for instance," he went on, good-naturedly; "but you are so charming! Only you could have coaxed Madame Desvarennes, and you have succeeded. Oh! she likes you, my dear Prince; she told me so only a little while ago. You have won her heart. I don't know how you manage it, but you are irresistible! By the way, I was not there when the marriage contract was read, and I forgot to ask Cayrol. Under what conditions are you married?"

The Prince looked at Herzog with a look that was hardly friendly. But the financier appeared so indifferent, that Serge could not help answering him:

"My wife's fortune is settled on herself."

"Ah! ah! that is usual in Normandy!" replied Herzog with a grave look. "I was told Madame Desvarennes was a clever woman and she has proved it. And you signed the contract with your eyes shut, my dear Prince. It is perfect, just as a gentleman should do!"

He said this with a good-natured air. Then, suddenly lifting his eyes, and with an ironical smile playing on his lips, he added:

"You are bowled out, my dear fellow, don't you know?"

"Sir!" protested Serge with haughtiness.

"Don't cry out; it is too late, and would be useless," replied the financier. "Let me explain your position to you. Your hands are tied. You cannot dispose of a

GEORGES OHNET

sou belonging to your wife without her consent. It is true, you have influence over her, happily for you. Still you must foresee that she will be guided by her mother. A strong woman, too, the mother! Ah, Prince, you have allowed yourself to be done completely. I would not have thought it of you."

Serge, nonplussed for a moment, regained his self-possession, and looked Herzog in the face:

"I don't know what idea you have formed of me, sir, and I don't know what object you have in speaking thus to me."

"My interest in you," interrupted the financier. "You are a charming fellow: you please me much. With your tastes, it is possible that in a brief time you may be short of money. Come and see me: I will put you into the way of business. *Au revoir*, Prince."

And without giving Serge time to answer him, Herzog reached the boudoir where his daughter was waiting with impatience. Behind him came the Prince looking rather troubled. The financier's words had awakened importunate ideas in his mind. Was it true that he had been duped by Madame Desvarennnes, and that the latter, while affecting airs of greatness and generosity, had tied him like a noodle to her daughter's apron-string? He made an effort to regain his serenity.

"Micheline loves me and all will be well," said he to himself.

Madame Desvarennnes joined the young married people. The rooms were clearing by degrees. Serge took Cayrol apart.

"What are you going to do to-night, my dear fellow?

SERGE PANINE

You know an apartment has been prepared for you here?"

"Yes, I have already thanked Madame Desvarennnes, but I mean to go back to Paris. Our little paradise is prepared for us, and I wish to enter it to-night. I have my carriage and horses here. I am taking away my wife post-haste."

"That is an elopement," said Serge, gayly, "quite in the style of the regency!"

"Yes, my dear Prince, that's how we bankers do it," said Cayrol, laughing.

Then changing his tone:

"See, I vibrate, I am palpitating. I am hot and cold by turns. Just fancy, I have never loved before; my heart is whole, and I love to distraction!"

Serge instinctively glanced at Jeanne. She was seated, looking sad and tired.

Madame Desvarennnes, between Jeanne and Micheline, had her arms twined round the two young girls. Regret filled her eyes. The mother felt that the last moments of her absolute reign were near, and she was contemplating with supreme adoration these two children who had grown up around her like two fragile and precious flowers. She was saying to them,

"Well, the great day is over. You are both married. You don't belong to me any longer. How I shall miss you! This morning I had two children, and now——"

"You have four," interrupted Micheline. "Why do you complain?"

"I don't complain," retorted Madame Desvarennnes, quickly.

GEORGES OHNET

"That's right!" said Micheline, gayly.

Then going toward Jeanne:

"But you are not speaking, you are so quiet; are you ill?"

Jeanne shuddered, and made an effort to soften the hard lines on her face.

"It is nothing. A little fatigue."

"And emotion," added Micheline. "This morning when we entered the church, at the sound of the organ, in the midst of flowers, surrounded by all our friends, I felt that I was whiter than my veil. And the crossing to my place seemed so long, I thought I should never get there. I did so, though. And now everybody calls me 'Madame' and some call me 'Princess.' It amuses me!"

Serge had approached.

"But you are a Princess," said he, smiling, "and everybody must call you so."

"Oh, not mamma, nor Jeanne, nor you," said the young wife, quickly; "always call me Micheline. It will be less respectful, but it will be more tender."

Madame Desvarennes could not resist drawing her daughter once more to her heart.

"Dear child," she said with emotion, "you need affection, as flowers need the sun! But I love you, there."

She stopped and added:

"We love you."

And she held out her hand to her son-in-law. Then changing the subject:

"But I am thinking, Cayrol, as you are returning to

SERGE PANINE

Paris, you might take some orders for me which I will write out."

"What? Business? Even on my wedding-day?" exclaimed Micheline.

"Eh! my daughter, we must have flour," replied the mistress, laughing. "While we are enjoying ourselves Paris eats, and it has a famous appetite."

Micheline, leaving her mother, went to her husband.

"Serge, it is not yet late. Suppose we put in an appearance at the work-people's ball? I promised them, and the good folks will be so happy!"

"As you please. I am awaiting your orders. Let us make ourselves popular!"

Madame Desvarennes had gone to her room. Cayrol took the opportunity of telling his coachman to drive round by the park to the door of the little conservatory and wait there. Thus, his wife and he would avoid meeting any one, and would escape the leave-taking of friends and the curiosity of lookers-on.

Micheline went up to Jeanne, and said:

"As you are going away quietly, dear, I shall not see you again this evening. Adieu!"

And with a happy smile, she kissed her. Then taking her husband's arm she led him toward the park.

CHAPTER X

CAYROL'S DISAPPOINTMENT



JANNE, left alone, watched them as they disappeared with the light and easy movements of lovers.

Serge, bending toward Micheline, was speaking tenderly. A rush of bitter feeling caused Jeanne's heart to swell. She was alone, she, while he whom she loved—her whole being revolted. Unhappy one! Why did she think of this man? Had she the right to do so now? She no longer belonged to herself. Another, who was as kind to her as Serge was ungrateful, was her husband. She thought thus in sincerity of heart. She wished to love Cayrol. Alas, poor Jeanne! She would load him with attentions and caresses! And Serge would be jealous, for he could never have forgotten her so soon.

Her thoughts again turned to him whom she wished to forget. She made an effort, but in vain. Serge was uppermost; he possessed her. She was afraid. Would she never be able to break off the remembrance? Would his name be ever on her lips, his face ever before her eyes?

Thank heaven! she was about to leave. Travelling, and the sight of strange places other than those where she had lived near Serge, would draw her attention from

SERGE PANINE

the persecution she suffered. Her husband was about to take her away, to defend her. It was his duty, and she would help him with energy. With all the strength of her will she summoned Cayrol. She clung violently to him as a drowning person catches at a straw, with the vigor of despair.

There was between Jeanne and Cayrol a sympathetic communication. Mentally called by his wife, the husband appeared.

"Ah! at last!" said she.

Cayrol, surprised at this welcome, smiled. Jeanne, without noticing, added:

"Well, Monsieur; are we leaving soon?"

The banker's surprise increased. But as this surprise was decidedly an agreeable one he did not protest.

"In a moment, Jeanne, dear," he said.

"Why this delay?" asked the young wife, nervously.

"You will understand. There are more than twenty carriages before the front door. Our coachman is driving round, and we will go out by the conservatory door without being seen."

"Very well; we will wait."

This delay displeased Jeanne. In the ardor of her resolution, in the first warmth of her struggle, she wished at once to put space between her and Serge. Unfortunately, Cayrol had thwarted this effort of proud revolt. She was vexed with him. He, without knowing the motives which actuated his wife, guessed that something had displeased her. He wished to change the current of her thoughts.

"You were marvellously beautiful to-night," he said,

GEORGES OHNET

approaching her gallantly. "You were much admired, and I was proud of you. If you had heard my friends! It was a concert of congratulations: What a fortunate fellow that Cayrol is! He is rich; he has a charming wife! You see, Jeanne, thanks to you, in the eyes of all, my happiness is complete."

Jeanne frowned, and without answering, shook her head haughtily. Cayrol continued, without noticing this forecast of a storm:

"They envy me; and I can understand it! I would not change places with anybody.. There, our friend Prince Panine is very happy; he has married a woman whom he loves and who adores him. Well, he is not happier than I am!"

Jeanne rose abruptly, and gave her husband a terrible look.

"Monsieur!" she cried with rage.

"I beg your pardon," said Cayrol, humbly; "I appear ridiculous to you, but my happiness is stronger than I am, and I cannot hide my joy. You will see that I can be grateful. I will spend my life in trying to please you. I have a surprise for you to begin with."

"What kind of surprise?" asked Jeanne, with indifference.

Cayrol rubbed his hands with a mysterious air. He was enjoying beforehand the pleasant surprise he had in store for his wife.

"You think we are going to Paris to spend our honeymoon like ordinary folk?"

Jeanne started. Cayrol seemed unfortunate in his choice of words.

SERGE PANINE

"Well, not at all," continued the banker. "To-morrow I leave my offices. My customers may say what they like; I will leave my business, and we are off."

Jeanne showed signs of pleasure. A flash of joy lit up her face. To go away, that was rest for her!

"And where shall we go?"

"That is the surprise! You know that the Prince and his wife intend travelling!"

"Yes; but they refused to say where they were going," interrupted Jeanne, with a troubled expression.

"Not to me. They are going to Switzerland. Well, we shall join them there."

Jeanne arose like a startled deer when it hears the sound of a gun.

"Join them there!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; to continue the journey together. A party of four; two newly-married couples. It will be charming. I spoke to Serge on the subject. He objected at first, but the Princess came to my assistance. And when he saw that his wife and I were agreed, he commenced to laugh, and said: 'You wish it? I consent. Don't say anything more!' It is all very well to talk of love's solitude; in about a fortnight, passed tête-à-tête, Serge will be glad to have us. We will go to Italy to see the lakes; and there, in a boat, all four of us will have such pleasant times."

Cayrol might have gone on talking for an hour, but Jeanne was not listening. She was thinking. Thus all the efforts which she had decided to make to escape from him whom she loved would be useless. An invin-

GEORGES OHNET

cible fatality ever brought her toward him whom she was seeking to avoid. And it was her husband who was aiding this inevitable and execrable meeting. A bitter smile played on her lips. There was something mournfully comic in this stubbornness of Cayrol's, in throwing her in the way of Serge.

Cayrol, embarrassed by Jeanne's silence, waited a moment.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "You are just like the Prince when I spoke to him on the subject."

Jeanne turned away abruptly. Cayrol's comparison was too direct. His blunders were becoming wearisome.

The banker, quite discomfited on seeing the effect of his words, continued:

"You object to this journey? If so, I am willing to give it up."

The young wife was touched by this humble servility.

"Well, yes," she said, softly, "I should be grateful to you."

"I had hoped to please you," said Cayrol. "It is for me to beg pardon for having succeeded so badly. Let us remain in Paris. It does not matter to me what place we are in! Being near to you is all I desire."

He approached her, and, with beaming eyes, added:

"You are so beautiful, Jeanne; and I have loved you so long a time!"

She moved away, full of a vague dread. Cayrol, very excitedly, put her cloak round her shoulders, and looking toward the door, added:

"The carriage is there, we can go now."

SERGE PANINE

Jeanne, much troubled, did not rise.

"Wait another minute," said she.

Cayrol smiled constrainedly:

"A little while ago you were hurrying me off."

It was true. But a sudden change had come over Jeanne. Her energy had given way. She felt very weary. The idea of going away with Cayrol, and of being alone with him in the carriage frightened her. She looked vaguely at her husband, and saw, in a sort of mist, this great fat man, with a protruding shirt-front, rolls of red flesh on his neck above his collar, long fat ears which only needed gold ear-rings, and his great hairy hands, on the finger of one of which shone the new wedding-ring. Then, in a rapid vision, she beheld the refined profile, the beautiful blue eyes, and the long, fair mustache of Serge. A profound sadness came over the young woman, and tears rushed to her eyes.

"What is the matter with you? You are crying!" exclaimed Cayrol, anxiously.

"It is nothing; my nerves are shaken. I am thinking of this château which bears my name. Here I spent my youth, and here my father died. A thousand ties bind me to this dwelling, and I cannot leave it without being overcome."

"Another home awaits you, luxuriantly adorned," murmured Cayrol, "and worthy of receiving you. It is there you will live henceforth with me, happy through me, and belonging to me."

Then, ardently supplicating her, he added:

"Let us go, Jeanne!"

GEORGES OHNET

He tried to take her in his arms, but the young wife disengaged herself.

"Leave me alone!" she said, moving away.

Cayrol looked at her in amazement.

"What is it? You are trembling and frightened!"

He tried to jest:

"Am I so very terrible, then? Or is it the idea of leaving here that troubles you so much? If so, why did you not tell me sooner? I can understand things. Let us remain here for a few days, or as long as you like. I have arranged my affairs so as to be at liberty. Our little paradise can wait for us."

He spoke pleasantly, but with an undercurrent of anxiety.

Jeanne came slowly to him, and calmly taking his hand, said:

"You are very good."

"I am not making any efforts to be so," retorted Cayrol, smiling. "What do I ask? That you may be happy and satisfied."

"Well, do you wish to please me?" asked the young wife.

"Yes!" exclaimed Cayrol, warmly, "tell me how."

"Madame Desvarennes will be very lonely to-morrow when her daughter will be gone. She will need consoling——"

"Ah, ah," said Cayrol, thinking that he understood, "and you would like——"

"I would like to remain some time with her. You could come every day and see us. I would be very grateful to you, and would love you very much!"

SERGE PANINE

"But—but—but—" exclaimed Cayrol, much confounded, "you cannot mean what you say, Jeanne! What, my dear? You wish me to return alone to Paris to-night? What would my servants say? You would expose me to ridicule!"

Poor Cayrol made a piteous face. Jeanne looked at him as she had never looked before. It made his blood boil.

"Would you be so very ridiculous for having been delicate and tender?"

"I don't see what tenderness has to do with it," cried Cayrol; "on the contrary! But I love you. You don't seem to think it!"

"Prove it," replied Jeanne, more provokingly.

This time Cayrol lost all patience.

"Is it in leaving you that I shall prove it? Really, Jeanne, I am disposed to be kind and to humor your whims, but on condition that they are reasonable. You seem to be making fun of me! If I give way on such important points on the day of our marriage, whither will you lead me? No, no! You are my wife. The wife must follow her husband; the law says so!"

"Is it by law only that you wish to keep me? Have you forgotten what I told you when you made me an offer of marriage? It is my hand only which I give you."

"And I answered you, that it would be my aim to gain your heart. Well, but give me the means. Come, dear," said the banker in a resolute tone, "you take me for a child. I am not so simple as that! I know what

GEORGES OHNET

this resistance means; charming modesty so long as it is not everlasting."

Jeanne turned away without answering. Her face had changed its expression; it was hard and determined.

"Really," continued Cayrol, "you would make a saint lose patience. Come, answer me, what does this attitude mean?"

The young wife remained silent. She felt she could not argue any longer, and seeing no way out of her trouble, felt quite discouraged. Still she would not yield. She shuddered at the very idea of belonging to this man; she had never thought of the issue of this brutal and vulgar adventure. Now that she realized it, she felt terribly disgusted.

Cayrol anxiously watched the increasing anguish depicted on his wife's face. He had a presentiment that she was hiding something from him, and the thought nearly choked him. And, with this suspicion, his ingenuity came to his aid. He approached Jeanne, and said, affectionately:

"Come, dear child, we are misleading one another; I in speaking too harshly, you in refusing to understand me. Forget that I am your husband; see in me only a friend and open your heart; your resistance hides a mystery. You have had some grief or have been deceived."

Jeanne, softened, said, in a low tone:

"Don't speak to me like that; leave me."

"No," resumed Cayrol, quietly, "we are beginning life; there must be no misunderstanding. Be frank,

SERGE PANINE

and you will find me indulgent. Come, young girls are often romantic. They picture an ideal; they fall in love with some one who does not return their love, which is sometimes even unknown to him who is their hero. Then, suddenly, they have to return to a reality. They find themselves face to face with a husband who is not the expected Romeo, but who is a good man, devoted, loving, and ready to heal the wounds he has not made. They are afraid of this husband; they mistrust him, and will not follow him. It is wrong, because it is near him, in honorable and right existence, that they find peace and forgetfulness."

Cayrol's heart was torn by anxiety, and with trembling voice he tried to read the effect of his words on Jeanne's features. She had turned away. Cayrol bent toward her and said:

"You don't answer me."

And as she still remained silent, he took her hand and forced her to look at him. He saw that her face was covered with tears. He shuddered, and then flew into a terrible passion.

"You are crying! It is true then? You have loved?"

Jeanne rose with a bound; she saw her imprudence. She understood the trap he had laid; her cheeks burned. Drying her tears, she turned toward Cayrol, and cried: "Who has said so?"

"You cannot deceive me," replied the banker, violently. "I saw it in your looks. Now, I want to know the man's name!"

Jeanne looked him straight in the face.

"Never!" she said.

GEORGES OHNET

"Ah, that is an avowal!" exclaimed Cayrol.

"You have deceived me unworthily by your pretended kindness," interrupted Jeanne, proudly, "I will not say anything more."

Cayrol flew at her—the churl reappeared. He muttered a fearful oath, and seizing her by the arm, shouted:

"Take care! Don't play with me. Speak, I insist, or—" and he shook her brutally.

Jeanne, indignant, screamed and tore herself away from him.

"Leave me," she said, "you fill me with horror!"

The husband, beside himself, pale as death and trembling convulsively, could not utter a word, and was about to rush upon her when the door opened, and Madame Desvarennes appeared, holding in her hand the letters which she had written for Cayrol to take back to Paris. Jeanne uttered a cry of joy, and with a bound threw herself into the arms of her who had been a mother to her.

CHAPTER XI

CONFESSTION

MADAME DESVARENNES understood the situation at a glance. She beheld Cayrol livid, tottering, and excited. She felt Jeanne trembling on her breast; she saw something serious had occurred. She calmed herself and put on a cold manner to enable her the better to suppress any resistance that they might offer.

"What is the matter?" she asked, looking severely at Cayrol.

"Something quite unexpected," replied the banker, laughing nervously. "Madame refuses to follow me."

"And for what reason?" she asked.

"She dare not speak!" Cayrol resumed, whose excitement increased as he spoke. "It appears she has in her heart an unhappy love! And as I do not resemble the dreamed-of type, Madame has repugnances. But you understand the affair is not going to end there. It is not usual to come and say to a husband, twelve hours after marriage, 'Sir, I am very sorry, but I love somebody else!' It would be too convenient. I shall not lend myself to these whims."

"Cayrol, oblige me by speaking in a lower tone,"

GEORGES OHNET

said Madame Desvarennes, quietly. "There is some misunderstanding between you and this child."

The husband shrugged his broad shoulders.

"A misunderstanding? Faith! I think so! You have a delicacy of language which pleases me! A misunderstanding! Say rather a shameful deception! But I want to know the gentleman's name. She will have to speak. I am not a scented, educated gentleman. I am a peasant, and if I have to——"

"Enough," said Madame Desvarennes, sharply tapping with the tips of her fingers Cayrol's great fist which he held menacingly like a butcher about to strike. Then, taking him quietly aside toward the window, she added:

"You are a fool to go on like this! Go to my room for a moment. To you, now, she will not say anything; to me she will confide all and we shall know what to do."

Cayrol's face brightened.

"You are right," he said. "Yes, as ever, you are right. You must excuse me, I do not know how to talk to women. Rebuke her and put a little sense in her head. But don't leave her; she is fit to commit any folly."

Madame Desvarennes smiled.

"Be easy," she answered.

And making a sign to Cayrol, who was leaving the room, she returned to Jeanne.

"Come, my child, compose yourself. We are alone and you will tell me what happened. Among women we understand each other. Come, you were frightened, eh?"

SERGE PANINE

Jeanne remained as one petrified, immovable, and dumb. She fixed her eyes on a flower which was hanging from a vase. This red flower fascinated her. She could not take her eyes off it. Within her a persistent thought recurred: that of her irremediable misfortune. Madame Desvarennes looked at her for a moment; then, gently touching her shoulder, resumed:

"Won't you answer me? Have you not confidence in me? Have I not brought you up? And if you are not born of me, have not the tenderness and care I have lavished upon you made me your real mother?"

Jeanne did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears.

"You know that I love you," continued the mistress. "Come, come to my arms as you used to do when you were little and were suffering. Place your head there on my heart and let your tears flow. I see they are choking you."

Jeanne could no longer resist, and falling on her knees beside Madame Desvarennes, she buried her face in the silky and scented folds of her dress like a frightened bird that flies to the nest and hides itself under the wings of its mother.

This great and hopeless grief was to the mistress a certain proof that Cayrol was right. Jeanne had loved and still loved another man than her husband. But why had she not said anything, and why had she allowed herself to be married to the banker? She had resisted, she remembered now. She had struggled, and the refusals they had put down to pride they must now attribute to passion.

She did not wish to be separated from him whom she

GEORGES OHNET

loved. Hence the struggle that had ended in her abandoning her hand to Cayrol, perhaps in a moment of despair and discouragement. But why had he whom she loved not married her? What obstacle had arisen between him and the young girl? Jeanne, so beautiful, and dowered by Madame Desvarennes, who then could have hesitated to ask her hand?

Perhaps he whom Jeanne loved was unworthy of her? No! She would not have chosen him. Perhaps he was not free to marry? Yes, it must be that. Some married man, perhaps! A scoundrel who did not mind breaking a young girl's heart! Where had she met him? In society at her house in the Rue Saint-Dominique, perhaps! Who could tell? He very likely still continued to come there. At the thought Madame Desvarennes grew angry. She wished to know the name of the man so that she might have an explanation with him, and tell him what she thought of his base conduct. The gentleman should have respectable, well-educated girls to trifle with, should he? And he risked nothing! He should be shown to the door with all honors due to his shameful conduct.

Jeanne was still weeping silently at Madame Desvarennes's knee. The latter raised her head gently and wiped away the tears with her lace pocket-handkerchief.

"Come, my child! all this deluge means nothing. You must make up your mind. I can understand your hiding anything from your husband, but not from me! What is your lover's name?"

This question so simply put, threw a faint light on

SERGE PANINE

Jeanne's troubled brain. She saw the danger she was running. To speak before Madame Desvarennes! To tell the name of him who had been false to her! To her! Was it possible? In a moment she understood that she was about to destroy Micheline and Serge. Her conscience revolted and she would not. She raised herself and looking at Madame Desvarennes with still frightened eyes,

"For pity's sake, forget my tears! Don't believe what my husband has told you. Never seek to know! Remain ignorant as you are on the subject!"

"Then he whom you love is related to me, as you wish to hide his name even from me," said Madame Desvarennes with instinctive anguish.

She was silent. Her eyes became fixed. They looked without seeing. She was thinking.

"I beseech you," cried Jeanne, madly placing her hands before Madame Desvarennes's face as if to check her scrutiny.

"If I had a son," continued the mistress, "I would believe—" Suddenly she ceased speaking; she became pale, and bending toward Jeanne, she looked into her very soul.

"Is it—" she began.

"No! no!" interrupted Jeanne, terrified at seeing that the mistress had found out the truth.

"You deny it before I have pronounced the name?" said Madame Desvarennes in a loud voice. "You read it then on my lips? Unhappy girl! The man whom you love is the husband of my daughter!"

My daughter! The accent with which Madame Des-

GEORGES OHNET

varennes pronounced the word "my" was full of tragical power. It revealed the mother capable of doing anything to defend the happiness of the child whom she adored. Serge had calculated well. Between Jeanne and Micheline, Madame Desvarennes would not hesitate. She would have allowed the world to crumble away to make of its ruins a shelter where her daughter would be joyous and happy.

Jeanne had fallen back overwhelmed. The mistress raised her roughly. She had no more consideration for her. It was necessary that she should speak. Jeanne was the sole witness, and if the truth had to be got by main force she should be made to speak it.

"Ah, forgive me!" moaned the young girl.

"It is not a question of that! In one word, answer me: Does he love you?"

"Do I know?"

"Did he tell you he did?"

"Yes."

"And he has married Micheline!" exclaimed Madame Desvarennes, with a fearful gesture. "I distrusted him. Why did I not obey my instinct?"

And she began walking about like a lioness in a cage. Then, suddenly stopping and placing herself before Jeanne, she continued:

"You must help me to save Micheline!"

She thought only of her own flesh and blood. Without hesitation, unconsciously, she abandoned the other—the child of adoption. She claimed the safety of her daughter as a debt.

SERGE PANINE

"What has she to fear?" asked Jeanne, bitterly.
"She triumphs, as she is his wife."

"If he were to abandon her," said the mother with anguish. Then, reflecting: "Still, he has sworn to me that he loved her."

"He lied!" cried Jeanne, with rage. "He married Micheline for her fortune!"

"But why that?" inquired Madame Desvarennes, menacingly. "Is she not pretty enough to have pleased him? Do you think that you are the only one to be loved?"

"If I had been rich he would have married me!" replied Jeanne, exasperated.

She had risen in revolt. They were treading too heavily on her. With a ferocious cry of triumph, she added:

"The night he used his influence with me to get me to marry Cayrol, he assured me so on his word of honor!"

"Honor!" ironically repeated Madame Desvarennes, overwhelmed. "How he has deceived us all! But what can I do? What course can I take? A separation? Micheline would not consent. She loves him."

And, in an outburst of fury, she cried:

"Is it possible that that stupid girl loves that worthless dandy? And she has my blood in her veins! If she knew the truth she would die!"

"Am I dead?" asked Jeanne, gloomily.

"You have an energetic nature," retorted the mistress, compassionately; "but she is so weak, so gentle! Ah! Jeanne, think what I have been to you; raise some insurmountable barrier between yourself and Serge!"

GEORGES OHNET

Go back to your husband. You would not go with him a little while ago. It was folly. If you separate from Cayrol, you will not be able to keep away Serge, and you will take my daughter's husband from her!"

"Ah! you think only of her! Her, always! She above all!" cried Jeanne, with rage. "But me, I exist, I count, I have the right to be protected, of being happy! And you wish me to sacrifice myself, to give myself up to this man, whom I do not love, and who terrifies me?"

This time the question was plainly put. Madame Desvarennes became herself. She straightened her figure, and in her commanding voice whose authority no one resisted, said:

"What then? You wish to be separated from him? To regain your liberty at the price of scandal? And what liberty? You will be repulsed, disdained. Believe me, impose silence on your heart and listen to your reason. Your husband is a good, loyal man. If you cannot love him, he will command your respect. In marrying him, you have entered into engagements toward him. Fulfil them; it is your duty."

Jeanne felt overpowered and vanquished. "But what will my life be?" she groaned.

"That of an honest woman," replied Madame Desvarennes, with true grandeur. "Be a wife; God will make you a mother, and you will be saved."

Jeanne bowed herself at these words. She no longer felt in them the selfishness of the mother. What the mistress now said was sincere and true. It was no longer her agitated and alarmed heart that inspired her; it was her conscience, calm and sincere.

SERGE PANINE

"Very well; I will obey you," said the young wife, simply. "Kiss me then, mother."

She bent her brow, and Madame Desvarennes let tears of gratitude and admiration fall on it. Then Jeanne went of her own accord to the room door.

"Come, Monsieur," called she to Cayrol.

The husband, grown cooler while waiting, and troubled at the length of the interview, showed his anxious face on the threshold. He saw Madame Desvarennes grave, and Jeanne collected. He dared not speak.

"Cayrol, everything is explained," said the mistress. "You have nothing to fear from him whom you suspected. He is separated from Jeanne forever. And, besides, nothing has passed between him and her who is your wife that could arouse your jealousy. I will not tell you the name of this man now. But if perchance he by some impossibility reappeared and threatened your happiness, I would myself—you understand me?—point him out to you!"

Cayrol remained thinking for a moment; then addressing Madame Desvarennes, replied:

"It is well. I have confidence in you."

Then turning toward Jeanne, he added:

"Forgive me and let everything be forgotten."

The mistress's face beamed with joy, as she followed their departing figures with her eyes, and murmured:

"Brave hearts!"

Then, changing her expression:

"Now for the other one!" exclaimed she.

And she went out on to the terrace.

CHAPTER XII

THE FETE



HE air was mild, the night clear and bright. Cayrol's carriage rolled rapidly along the broad avenue of the park shadowed by tall trees, the lanterns throwing, as they passed, their quivering light on the thickets. The rumbling carriages took the last guests to the railway station. It was past midnight. A nightingale began singing his song of love to the stars.

Madame Desvarennnes mechanically stopped to listen. A sense of sorrow came over this mother who was a prey to the most cruel mental anguish. She thought that she could have been very happy on that splendid night, if her heart had been full of quietude and serenity. Her two daughters were married; her last task was accomplished. She ought to have nothing to do but enjoy life after her own fashioning, and be calm and satisfied. Instead of that, here were fear and dissimulation taking possession of her mind; and an ardent, pitiless struggle beginning against the man who had deceived her daughter and lied to her. The bark which carried her fortune, on reaching port, had caught fire, and it was necessary to begin laboring again amid cares and pains.

SERGE PANINE

A dull rage filled her heart. To have so surely built up the edifice of her happiness, to have embellished it every hour, and then to see an intruder audaciously taking possession of it, and making his despotic and hateful authority prevail! And what could she do against this new master? Nothing. He was marvelously protected by Micheline's mad love for him. To strike Serge would be to wound Micheline surely and mortally. So this scoundrel could laugh at her and dare her with impunity!

What must she do? Take him aside and tell him that she knew of his disloyal conduct, and tell him of her contempt and hatred for him? And after that? What would be the consequence of this outburst of violence? The Prince, using his power over Micheline, would separate the daughter from the mother. And Madame Desvarennes would be alone in her corner, abandoned like a poor dog, and would die of despair and anger. What other course then? She must dissemble, mask her face with indifference, if possible with tenderness, and undertake the difficult task of separating Micheline from the man whom she adored. It was quite a feat of strategy to plan. To bring out the husband's faults and to make his errors known, and give her the opportunity of proving his worthlessness. In a word, to make the young wife understand that she had married an elegant manikin, unworthy of her love.

It would be an easy matter to lay snares for Serge. He was a gambler. She could let him have ready money to satisfy his passion. Once in the clutches of the demon of play, he would neglect his wife, and the

GEORGES OHNET

mother might regain a portion of the ground she had lost. Micheline's fortune once broken into, she would interpose between her daughter and son-in-law. She would make him pull up, and holding him tightly by her purse-strings, would lead him whither she liked.

Already in fancy she saw her authority regained, and her daughter, her treasure, her life, true mistress of the situation, grateful to her for having saved her. And then, she thought, a baby will come, and if Micheline is really my daughter, she will adore the little thing, and the blind love which she has given to her husband will be diminished by so much.

Serge did not know what an adversary he had against him in his mother-in-law. It was a bad thing to cross the mistress when business matters were concerned, but now that her daughter's happiness was at stake! A smile came to her lips. A firm resolution from that hour must guide her, and the struggle between her son-in-law and herself could only end by the crushing of one of them.

In the distance the music from the work-people's ball was heard. Madame Desvarennes mechanically bent her steps toward the tent under which the heavy bounds of the dancers reëchoed. Every now and then large shadows appeared on the canvas. A joyful clamor issued from the ballroom. Loud laughter resounded, mingled with piercing cries of tickled women.

The voice of the master of the ceremonies could be heard jocose and solemn: "*La poule!* Advance! Set to partners!" Then the stamping of heavy shoes on the badly planed floor, and, above all, the melancholy

SERGE PANINE

sounds of the clarionet and the shrill notes of the cornet were audible.

At the entrance of the ballroom, surrounded by tables and stools, two barrels of wine on stands presented their wooden taps, ready for those who wanted to quench their thirst. A large red mark under each barrel showed that the hands of the drinkers were no longer steady. A cake-seller had taken up his place at the other side, and was kneading a last batch of paste, while his apprentice was ringing a bell which hung over the iron cooking-stove to attract customers. There was an odor of rancid butter, spilled wine, and paraffin oil.

Adjoining the ballroom, a merry-go-round, which had been the delight of the village urchins all day, appealed for custom by the aid of a barrel-organ on which a woman in a white bodice was playing the waltz from *Les Cloches de Corneville*.

The animation of this fête, in the midst of which Madame Desvarennes suddenly appeared, was a happy diversion from the serious thoughts which beset her. She remembered that Serge and Micheline must be there. She came from under the shadow of the avenue into the full light. On recognizing her, all the work-people, who were seated, rose. She was really mistress and lady of the place. And then she had fed these people since morning. With a sign she bade them be seated, and walking quickly toward the dancing-room, lifted the red and white cotton curtain which hung over the entrance.

There, in a space of a hundred square yards or so, about a hundred and fifty people were sitting or standing. At the end, on a stage, were the musicians, each

GEORGES OHNET

with a bottle of wine at his feet, from which they refreshed themselves during the intervals. An impalpable dust, raised by the feet of the dancers, filled the air charged with acrid odors. The women in light dresses and bareheaded, and the men arrayed in their Sunday clothes, gave themselves up with frantic ardor to their favorite pleasure.

Ranged in double rows, vis-à-vis, they were waiting with impatience for the music to strike up for the last figure. Near the orchestra, Serge was dancing with the Mayor's daughter opposite Micheline, whose partner was the mayor himself. An air of joyful gravity lit up the municipal officer's face. He was enjoying the honor which the Princess had done him. His pretty young daughter, dressed in her confirmation dress, which had been lengthened with a muslin flounce, a rose in her hair, and her hands encased in straw-colored one-button kid gloves, hardly dared raise her eyes to the Prince, and with burning cheeks, answered in monosyllables the few remarks Serge felt forced to address to her.

The orchestra bellowed, the floor shook; the two lines of dancers had advanced in a body. Madame Desvarennes, leaning against the door-post, followed with her eyes her daughter, whose light footsteps contrasted strangely with the heavy tread of the women around her. The mayor, eager and respectful, followed her, making efforts to keep up with her without treading on her long train. It was,

“Excuse me, Madame la Princesse. If Madame la Princesse will do me the honor to give me her hand, it is our turn to cross.”

SERGE PANINE

They had just crossed. Serge suddenly found himself facing his mother-in-law. His face lit up, and he uttered a joyful exclamation. Micheline raised her eyes, and following her husband's look, perceived her mother. Then it was a double joy. With a mischievous wink, Serge called Madame Desvarennnes's attention to the mayor's solemn appearance as he was galloping with Micheline, also the comical positions of the rustics.

Micheline was smiling. She was enjoying herself. All this homely gayety, of which she was the cause, made her feel happy. She enjoyed the pleasure of those around her. With her compassionate eyes she thanked her mother in the distance for having prepared this fête in honor of her marriage. The clarionet, violin, and cornet sounded a last modulation, then the final cadence put an end to the bounds of the dances. Each took his lady to her place—the mayor with pompous gait, Serge with as much grace as if he had been at an ambassador's ball and was leading a young lady of highest rank.

Madame Desvarennnes was suddenly surrounded; cheers resounded, the band struck up the *Marseillaise*.

"Let us escape," said Serge, "because these good people will think nothing of carrying us in triumph."

And leading away his mother-in-law and his wife, he left the ballroom followed by cheers.

Outside they all three walked in silence. The night air was delightful after coming out of that furnace. The cheering had ceased, and the orchestra was playing a polka. Micheline had taken her husband's arm.

GEORGES OHNET

They went along slowly, and close together. Not a word was exchanged; they all three seemed to be listening within themselves. When they reached the house, they went up the steps leading into the greenhouse, which served also as a boudoir to Madame Desvarennes.

The atmosphere was still warm and scented, the lamps still burning. The guests had left; Micheline looked round. The remembrance of this happy evening, which had been the crowning of her happiness, filled her heart with emotion. Turning toward her mother with a radiant face, she cried:

"Ah! mamma! I am so happy," and threw her arms around her.

Serge started at this cry. Two tears came to his eyes, and looking a little pale, he stretched out to Madame Desvarennes his hands, which she felt trembling in hers, and said:

"Thank you."

Madame Desvarennes gazed at him for a moment. She did not see the shadow of a wicked thought on his brow. He was sincerely affected, truly grateful. The idea occurred to her that Jeanne had deceived her, or had deceived herself, and that Serge had not loved her. A feeling of relief took possession of her. But distrust had unfortunately entered her mind. She put away that flattering hope. And giving her son-in-law such a look, which, had he been less moved, he would have understood, she murmured,

"We shall see."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIRST BREAK



HE first two months of this union were truly enchanting. Serge and Micheline never left each other. After an absence of eight days they had returned to Paris with Madame Desvarennes, and the hitherto dull mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique was filled with joyful bustle. The splendid stables, formerly too large for the mistress's three horses, were now insufficient for the service of the Prince. There were eight splendid carriagehorses, a pair of charming ponies—bought especially for Micheline's use, but which the young wife had not been able to make up her mind to drive herself—four saddle-horses, upon which every morning about eight o'clock, when the freshness of night had perfumed the Bois de Boulogne, the young people took their ride round the lake.

A bright sun made the sheet of water sparkle between its borders of dark fir-trees; the fresh air played in Micheline's veil, and the tawny leather of the saddles creaked. Those were happy days for Micheline, who was delighted at having Serge near her, attentive to her every want, and controlling his thoroughbred English horse to her gentle pace. Every now and

GEORGES OHNET

then his mount would wheel about and rear in revolt, she following him with fond looks, proud of the elegant cavalier who could subdue without apparent effort, by the mere pressure of his thighs, that impetuous steed.

Then she would give her horse a touch with the whip, and off she would go at a gallop, feeling happy with the wind blowing in her face, and he whom she loved by her side to smile on and encourage her. Then they would scamper along; the dog with his thin body almost touching the ground, racing and frightening the rabbits, which shot across the road swift as bullets. Out of breath by the violent ride, Micheline would stop, and pat the neck of her lovely chestnut horse. Slowly the young people would return to the Rue Saint-Dominique, and, on arriving in the courtyard, there was such a pawing of feet as brought the clerks to the windows, hiding behind the curtains. Tired with healthy exercise, Micheline would go smiling to the office where her mother was hard at work, and say:

“Here we are, mamma!”

The mistress would rise and kiss her daughter beaming with freshness. Then they would go up to breakfast.

Madame Desvarennés's doubts were lulled to rest. She saw her daughter happy. Her son-in-law was in every respect cordial and charming toward her. Cayrol and his wife had scarcely been in Paris since their marriage. The banker had joined Herzog in his great scheme of the “Credit,” and was travelling all over Europe establishing offices and securing openings.

SERGE PANINE

Jeanne accompanied him. They were then in Greece. The young wife's letters to her adopted mother breathed calmness and satisfaction. She highly praised her husband's kindness to her, and said it was unequalled.

No allusion was made to that evening of their marriage, when, escaping from Cayrol's wrath, she had thrown herself in Madame Desvarennnes's arms, and had allowed her secret to be found out. The mistress might well think then that the thought which at times still troubled her mind was a remembrance of a bad dream.

What contributed especially to make her feel secure was Jeanne's absence. If the young woman had been near Serge, Madame Desvarennnes might have trembled. But Micheline's beautiful rival was far away, and Serge seemed very much in love with his wife.

Everything was for the best. The formidable projects which Madame Desvarennnes had formed in the heat of her passion had not been carried out. Serge had as yet not given Madame Desvarennnes cause for real displeasure. Certainly he was spending money foolishly, but then his wife was so rich!

He had put his household on an extraordinary footing. Everything that most refined luxury had invented he had introduced as a matter of course, and for every-day use. He entertained magnificently several times a week. And Madame Desvarennnes, from her apartments, for she would never appear at these grand receptions, heard the noise of these doings. This woman, modest and simple in her ideas, whose luxury had always been artistic, wondered that they could spend so

GEORGES OHNET

much on frivolous entertainments. But Micheline was queen of these sumptuous ceremonies. She came in full dress to be admired by her mother, before going down to receive her guests, and the mistress had not courage to offer any remonstrances as to expense when she saw her daughter so brilliant and contented.

They played cards very much. The great colony of foreigners who came every week to Panine's receptions brought with them their immoderate passion for cards, and he was only too willing to give way to it. These gentlemen, among them all, almost without taking off their white kid gloves, would win or lose between forty and fifty thousand francs at bouillotte, just to give them an appetite before going to the club to finish the night at baccarat.

Meanwhile the ladies, with their graceful toilettes displayed on the low soft chairs, talked of dress behind their fans, or listened to the songs of a professional singer, while young men whispered soft nothings in their ears.

It was rumored that the Prince lost heavily. It was not to be wondered at; he was so happy in love! Madame Desvarennes, who used every means of gaining information on the subject, even to the gossip of the servants, heard that the sums were enormous. No doubt they were exaggerated, but the fact remained the same. The Prince was losing.

Madame Desvarennes could not resist the inclination of finding out whether Micheline knew what was going on, and one morning when the young wife came down to see her mother, dressed in a lovely pink gown,

SERGE PANINE

the mistress, while teasing her daughter, said, carelessly:

"It seems your husband lost heavily last night."

Micheline looked astonished at Madame Desvarennnes, and in a quiet voice replied:

"A good host may not win from his guests; it would look as if he invited them to rob them. Losses at cards are included in the costs of a reception."

Madame Desvarennnes thought that her daughter had become a very grand lady, and had soon acquired expanded ideas. But she dared not say anything more. She dreaded a quarrel with her daughter, and would have sacrificed everything to retain her cajoling ways.

She threw herself into her work with renewed vigor.

"If the Prince spends large sums," she said to herself, "I will earn larger ones. There can be no hole dug deep enough by him that I shall not be able to fill up."

And she made the money come in at the door so that her son-in-law might throw it out of the window.

One fine day these great people who visited at the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique hastened away to the country. September had arrived, bringing with it the shooting season. The Prince and Micheline settled themselves at Cernay, not as in the first days of their marriage as lovers who sought quietude, but as people sure of their happiness, who wished to make a great show. They took all the carriages with them, and there was nothing but bustle and movement. The four keepers, dressed in the Prince's livery, came daily for

GEORGES OHNET

orders as to shooting arrangements. And every week shoals of visitors arrived, brought from the station in large breaks drawn by four horses.

The princely dwelling was in its full splendor. There was a continual going and coming of fashionable worldlings. From top to bottom of the castle was a constant rustling of silk dresses; groups of pretty women, coming downstairs with peals of merry laughter and singing snatches from the last opera. In the spacious hall they played billiards and other games, while one of the gentlemen performed on the large organ. There was a strange mixture of freedom and strictness. The smoke of Russian cigarettes mingled with the scent of opopanax. An elegant confusion which ended about six o'clock in a general flight, when the sportsmen came home, and the guests went to their rooms. An hour afterward all these people met in the large drawing-room; the ladies in low-bodied evening dresses; the gentlemen in dress-coats and white satin waistcoats, with a sprig of mignonette and a white rose in their buttonholes. After dinner, they danced in the drawing-rooms, where a mad waltz would even restore energy to the gentlemen tired out by six hours spent in the field.

Madame Desvarennes did not join in that wild existence. She had remained in Paris, attentive to business. On Saturdays she came down by the five o'clock train and regularly returned on the Monday morning. Her presence checked their wild gayety a little. Her black dress was like a blot among the brocades and satins. Her severe gravity, that of a woman who pays and sees

SERGE PANINE

the money going too fast, was like a reproach, silent but explicit, to that gay and thoughtless throng of idlers, solely taken up by their pleasure.

The servants made fun of her. One day the Prince's valet, who thought himself a clever fellow, said before all the other servants that Mother Damper had arrived. Of course they all roared with laughter and exclaimed:

"Bother the old woman! Why does she come and worry us? She had far better stop in the office and earn money; that's all she's good for!"

The disdain which the servants learned from their master grew rapidly. So much so that one Monday morning, toward nine o'clock, Madame Desvarennes came down to the courtyard, expecting to find the carriage which generally took her to the station. It was the second coachman's duty to drive her, and she did not see him. Thinking that he was a little late, she walked to the stable-yard. There, instead of the victoria which usually took her, she saw a large mail-coach to which two grooms were harnessing the Prince's four bays. The head coachman, an Englishman, dressed like a gentleman, with a stand-up collar, and a rose in his buttonhole, stood watching the operations with an air of importance.

Madame Desvarennes went straight to him. He had seen her coming, out of the corner of his eye, without disturbing himself.

"How is it that the carriage is not ready to take me to the station?" asked the mistress.

"I don't know, Madame," answered this personage, condescendingly, without taking his hat off.

GEORGES OHNET

"But where is the coachman who generally drives me?"

"I don't know. If Madame would like to see in the stables——"

And with a careless gesture, the Englishman pointed out to Madame Desvarennes the magnificent buildings at the end of the courtyard.

The blood rose to the mistress's cheeks; she gave the coachman such a look that he moved away a little. Then glancing at her watch, she said, coldly:

"I have only a quarter of an hour before the train leaves, but here are horses that ought to go well. Jump on the box, my man, you shall drive me."

The Englishman shook his head.

"Those horses are not for service; they are only for pleasure," he answered. "I drive the Prince. I don't mind driving the Princess, but I am not here to drive you, Madame."

And with an insolent gesture, setting his hat firmly on his head, he turned his back upon the mistress. At the same moment, a sharp stroke from a light cane made his hat roll on the pavement. And as the Englishman turned round, red with rage, he found himself face to face with the Prince, whose approach neither Madame Desvarennes nor he had heard.

Serge, in an elegant morning suit, was going round his stables when he had been attracted by this discussion. The Englishman, uneasy, sought to frame an excuse.

"Hold your tongue!" exclaimed the Prince, sharply, "and go and wait my orders."

And turning toward the mistress:

SERGE PANINE

"Since this man refuses to drive you, I shall have the pleasure of taking you to the station myself," he said, with a charming smile.

And as Madame Desvarennnes remonstrated,

"Oh! I can drive four-in-hand," he added. "For once in my life that talent will have been of some use to me. Pray jump in."

And opening the door of the mail-coach he handed her into the vast carriage. Then, climbing with one bound to the box, he gathered the reins and, cigar in mouth, with all the coolness of an old coachman, he started the horses in the presence of all the grooms, and made a perfect semicircle on the gravel of the courtyard.

The incident was repeated favorably for Serge. It was agreed that he had behaved like a true nobleman. Micheline was proud of it, and saw in this act of deference to her mother a proof of his love for her. As to the mistress, she understood the advantage this clever manœuvre gave to the Prince. At the same time she felt the great distance which henceforth separated her from the world in which her daughter lived.

The insolence of that servant was a revelation to her. They despised her. The Prince's coachman would not condescend to drive a plebeian like her. She paid the wages of these servants to no purpose. Her plebeian origin and business habits were a vice. They submitted to her; they did not respect her.

Although her son-in-law and daughter were perfect toward her in their behavior, she became gloomy and dull, and but seldom went now to Cernay. She felt in

GEORGES OHNET

the way, and uncomfortable. The smiling and superficial politeness of the visitors irritated her nerves. These people were too well bred to be rude toward Panine's mother-in-law, but she felt that their politeness was forced. Under their affected nicety she detected irony. She began to hate them all.

Serge, sovereign lord of Cernay, was really happy. Every moment he experienced new pleasure in gratifying his taste for luxury. His love for horses grew more and more. He gave orders to have a model stud-house erected in the park amid the splendid meadows watered by the Oise; and bought stallions and breeding mares from celebrated English breeders. He contemplated starting a racing stable.

One day when Madame Desvarennnes arrived at Cernay, she was surprised to see the greensward bordering the woods marked out with white stakes. She asked inquiringly what these stakes meant? Micheline answered in an easy tone:

"Ah! you saw them? That is the track for training. We made Mademoiselle de Cernay gallop there to-day. She's a level-going filly with which Serge hopes to win the next Poule des Produits."

The mistress was amazed. A child who had been brought up so simply, in spite of her large fortune, a little commoner, speaking of level-going fillies and the Poule des Produits! What a change had come over her and what incredible influence this frivolous, vain Panine had over that young and right-minded girl! And that in a few months! What would it be later? He would succeed in imparting to her his tastes and would

SERGE PANINE

mould her to his whims, and the young modest girl whom he had received from the mother would become a horsey and fast woman.

Was it possible that Micheline could be happy in that hollow and empty life? The love of her husband satisfied her. His love was all she asked for, all else was indifferent to her. Thus of her mother, the impassioned toiler, was born the passionate lover! All the fervency which the mother had given to business, Micheline had given to love.

Moreover, Serge behaved irreproachably. One must do him that justice. Not even an appearance accused him. He was faithful, unlikely as that may seem in a man of his kind; he never left his wife. He had hardly ever gone out without her; they were a couple of turtle-doves. They were laughed at.

"The Princess has tied a string round Serge's foot," was said by some of Serge's former woman friends!

It was something to be sure of her daughter's happiness. That happiness was dearly bought; but as the proverb says:

"Money troubles are not mortal!"

And, besides, it was evident that the Prince did not keep account of his money; his hand was always open. And never did a great lord do more honor to his fortune. Panine, in marrying Micheline, had found the mistress's cash-box at his disposal.

This prodigious cash-box had seemed to him inexhaustible, and he had drawn on it like a Prince in the Arabian Nights on the treasure of the genii.

Perhaps it would suffice to let him see that he was

GEORGES OHNET

spending the capital as well as the income to make him alter his line of conduct. At all events, the moment was not yet opportune, and, besides, the amount was not yet large enough. Cry out about some hundred thousand francs! Madame Desvarennes would be thought a miser and would be covered with shame. She must wait.

And, shut up in her office in the Rue Saint-Dominique with Maréchal, who acted as her confidant, she worked with heart and soul full of passion and anger, making money. It was fine to witness the duel between these two beings: the one useful, the other useless; one sacrificing everything to work, the other everything to pleasure.

Toward the end of October, the weather at Cernay became unsettled, and Micheline complained of the cold. Country life so pleased Serge that he turned a deaf ear to her complaints. But lost in that large house, the autumn winds rustling through the trees, whose leaves were tinted with yellow, Micheline became sad, and the Prince understood that it was time to go back to Paris.

The town seemed deserted to Serge. Still, returning to his splendid apartments was a great satisfaction and pleasure to him. Everything appeared new. He reviewed the hangings, the expensive furniture, the paintings and rare objects. He was charmed. It was really of wonderful beauty, and the cage seemed worthy of the bird. For several evenings he remained quietly at home with Micheline, in the little silver-gray drawing-room that was his favorite room. He looked through

SERGE PANINE

albums, too, while his wife played at her piano quietly or sang.

They retired early and came down late. Then he had become a gourmand. He spent hours in arranging menus and inventing unknown dishes about which he consulted his chef, a cook of note.

He rode in the Bois in the course of the day, but did not meet any one there; for of every two carriages one was a hackney coach with a worn-out sleepy horse, his head hanging between his knees, going the round of the lake. He ceased going to the Bois, and went out on foot in the Champs-Elysées. He crossed the Pont de la Concorde, and walked up and down the avenues near the Cirque.

He was wearied. Life had never appeared so monotonous to him. Formerly he had at least the preoccupations of the future. He asked himself how he could alter the sad condition in which he vegetated! Shut up in this happy existence, without a care or a cross, he grew weary like a prisoner in his cell. He longed for the unforeseen; his wife irritated him, she was of too equable a temperament. She always met him with the same smile on her lips. And then happiness agreed with her too well; she was growing stout.

One day, on the Boulevard des Italiens, Serge met an old friend, the Baron de Préfont, a hardened *roué*. He had not seen him since his marriage. It was a pleasure to him. They had a thousand things to say to each other. And walking along, they came to the Rue Royale.

GEORGES OHNET

"Come to the club," said Préfont, taking Serge by the arm.

The Prince, having nothing else to do, allowed himself to be led away, and went. He felt a strange pleasure in those large rooms of the club, the Grand Cercle, with their glaring furniture. The common easy-chairs, covered with dark leather, seemed delightful. He did not notice the well-worn carpets burned here and there by the hot cigar-ash; the strong smell of tobacco, impregnated in the curtains, did not make him feel qualmish. He was away from home, and was satisfied with anything for a change. He had been domesticated long enough.

One morning, taking up the newspaper, a name caught Madame Desvarennnes's eye—that of the Prince. She read:

"The golden book of the Grand Cercle has just had another illustrious name inscribed in it. The Prince Panine was admitted yesterday, proposed by the Baron de Préfont and the Duc de Bligny."

These few lines made Madame Desvarennnes's blood boil. Her ears tingled as if all the bells of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont had been rung together. In a rapid vision, she saw misfortune coming. Her son-in-law, that born gambler, at the Grand Cercle! No more smiles for Micheline; henceforth she had a terrible rival—the devouring love of play.

Then Madame Desvarennnes reflected. The husband's deserting his fireside would be salvation for herself. The door by which he went out, would serve as an entrance for her. The plan which she had conceived

SERGE PANINE

at Cernay that terrible night of the marriage when Jeanne had confided in her, remained for her to execute. By opening her purse widely to the Prince, she would help him in his vice. And she would infallibly succeed in separating Serge and Micheline.

But the mistress checked herself. Lend her hands to the destruction of her son-in-law in a fit of fierce maternal egoism? Was it not unworthy of her? How many tears would the Prince's errors cost her whom she wished to regain at all price? And then would she always be there to compensate by her devoted affection the bitterly regretted estrangement from the husband? She would, in dying, leave the household disunited.

She was horrified at what she had for an instant dreamed of doing. And instead of helping the Prince on to destruction, she determined to do all in her power to keep him in the path of honor. That resolution formed, Madame Desvarennes was satisfied. She felt superior to Serge, and to a mind like hers the thought was strengthening.

The admission to the Grand Cercle gave Serge a powerful element of interest in life. He had to manœuvre to obtain his liberty. His first evenings spent from home troubled Micheline deeply. The young wife was jealous when she saw her husband going out. She feared a rival, and trembled for her love. Serge's mysterious conduct caused her intolerable torture. She dared not say anything to her mother, and remained perfectly quiet on the subject before her husband. She sought discreetly, listened to the least word that might throw any light on the matter.

GEORGES OHNET

One day she found an ivory counter, bearing the stamp of the Grand Cercle, in her husband's dressing-room. It was in the Rue Royale then that her husband spent his evenings. This discovery was a great relief to her. It was not very wrong to go there, and if the Prince did go and smoke a few cigars and have a game at bouillotte, it was not a very great crime. The return of his usual friends to Paris and the resumption of their receptions would bring him home again.

Serge now left Micheline about ten o'clock in the evening regularly and arrived at the club about eleven. High play did not commence until after midnight. Then he seated himself at the gaming-table with all the ardor of a professional gambler. His face changed its expression. When winning, it was animated with an expression of awful joy; when losing, he looked as hard as a stone, his features contracted, and his eyes were full of gloomy fire. He bit his mustache convulsively. Moreover, always silent, winning or losing with superb indifference.

He lost. His bad luck had followed him. At the club his losses were no longer limited. There was always some one willing to take a hand, and until dawn he played, wasting his life and energies to satisfy his insane love of gambling.

One morning, Maréchal entered Madame Desverrennes's private office, holding a little square piece of paper. Without speaking a word, he placed it on the desk. The mistress took it, read what was written upon it in shaky handwriting, and suddenly becoming purple, rose. The paper bore these simple words:

SERGE PANINE

"Received from Monsieur Salignon the sum of one hundred thousand francs. Serge Panine."

"Who brought this paper?" asked Madame Desvarennnes, crushing it between her fingers.

"The waiter who attends the card-room at the club."

"The waiter?" cried Madame Desvarennnes, astonished.

"Oh, he is a sort of banker," said Maréchal. "These gentlemen apply to him when they run short of money. The Prince must have found himself in that predicament. Still he has just received the rents for the property in the Rue de Rivoli."

"The rents!" grumbled Madame Desvarennnes, with an energetic movement. "The rents! A drop of water in a river! You don't know that he is a man to lose the hundred thousand francs which they claim, in one night."

The mistress paced up and down the room. She suddenly came to a standstill. "If I don't stop him, the rogue will sell the feather-bed from under my daughter! But he shall have a little of my mind! He has provoked me long enough. Pay it! I'll take my money's worth out of him."

And in a second, Madame Desvarennnes was in the Prince's room.

Serge, after a delicate breakfast, was smoking and dozing on the smoking-room sofa. The night had been a heavy one for him. He had won two hundred and fifty thousand francs from Ibrahim Bey, then he had lost all, besides five thousand louis advanced by the obliging Salignon. He had told the waiter to come to

GEORGES OHNET

the Rue Saint-Dominique, and by mistake the man had gone to the office.

The sudden opening of the smoking-room door roused Serge. He unclosed his eyes and looked very much astonished at seeing Madame Desvarennes appear. Pale, frowning, and holding the accusing paper in her hand, she angrily inquired:

"Do you recognize that?" and placed the receipt which he had signed, before him, as he slowly rose.

Serge seized it quickly, and then looking coldly at his mother-in-law, said:

"How did this paper come into your hands?"

"It has just been brought to my cashier. A hundred thousand francs! Faith! You are going ahead! Do you know how many bushels of corn must be ground to earn that?"

"I beg your pardon, Madame," said the Prince, interrupting Madame Desvarennes. "I don't suppose you came here to give me a lesson in commercial statistics. This paper was presented to your cashier by mistake. I was expecting it, and here is the money ready to pay it. As you have been good enough to do so, pray refund yourself."

And taking a bundle of bank-notes from a cabinet, the Prince handed them to the astonished mistress.

"But," she sought to say, very much put out by this unexpected answer, "where did you get this money from? You must have inconvenienced yourself."

"I beg your pardon," said the Prince, quietly, "that only concerns myself. Be good enough to see whether the amount is there," added he with a smile. "I

SERGE PANINE

reckon so badly that it is possible I may have made a mistake to your disadvantage."

Madame Desvarennnes pushed away the hand which presented the bank-notes, and shook her head gravely:

"Keep this money," she said; "unfortunately you will need it. You have entered on a very dangerous path, which grieves me very much. I would willingly give ten times the amount, at once, to be sure that you would never touch another card."

"Madame!" said the Prince with impatience.

"Oh! I know what I am risking by speaking thus—It weighs so heavily on my heart. I must give vent to it or I shall choke. You are spending money like a man who does not know what it is to earn it. And if you continue——"

Madame Desvarennnes raised her eyes and looked at the Prince. She saw him so pale with suppressed rage that she dared not say another word. She read deadly hatred in the young man's look. Frightened at what she had just been saying, she stepped back, and went quickly toward the door.

"Take this money, Madame," said Serge, in a trembling voice. "Take it, or all is over between us forever."

And, seizing the notes, he put them by force in Madame Desvarennnes's hands. Then tearing up with rage the paper that had been the cause of this painful scene, he threw the pieces in the fireplace.

Deeply affected, Madame Desvarennnes descended the stairs which she had a few minutes before gone up with so much resolution. She had a presentiment that an

GEORGES OHNET

irreparable rupture had just taken place between herself and her son-in-law. She had ruffled Panine's pride. She felt that he would never forgive her. She went to her room sad and thoughtful. Life was becoming gloomy for this poor woman. Her confidence in herself had disappeared. She hesitated now, and was irresolute when she had to take a decision. She no longer went straight to the point by the shortest road. Her sonorous voice was softened. She was no longer the same willing energetic woman who feared no obstacles. She had known defeat.

The attitude of her daughter had changed toward her. It seemed as if Micheline wished to absolve herself of all complicity with Madame Desvarennnes. She kept away to prove to her husband that if her mother had displeased him in any way, she had nothing to do with it. This behavior grieved her mother, who felt that Serge was working secretly to turn Micheline against her. And the mad passion of the young wife for him whom she recognized as her master did not allow the mother to doubt which side she would take if ever she had to choose between husband and mother.

One day Micheline came down to see her mother. It was more than a month since she had visited her. In a moment Madame Desvarennnes saw that she had something of an embarrassing nature to speak of. To begin with she was more affectionate than usual, seeming to wish with the honey of her kisses to sweeten the bitter cross which the mistress was doomed to bear. Then she hesitated. She fidgeted about the room humming. At last she said that the doctor had come at the

SERGE PANINE

request of Serge, who was most anxious about his wife's health. And that excellent Doctor Rigaud, who had known her from a child, had found her suffering from great weakness. He had ordered change of air.

At these words Madame Desvarennes raised her head and gave her daughter a terrible look:

"Come, no nonsense! Speak the truth! He is taking you away!"

"But, mamma," said Micheline, disconcerted at this interruption, "I assure you, you are mistaken. Anxiety for my health alone guides my husband."

"Your husband!" broke forth Madame Desvarennes. "Your husband! Ah, there; go away! Because if you stop here, I shall not be able to control myself, and shall say things about him that you will not forgive in a hurry! As you are ill, you are right to have change of air. I shall remain here, without you, fastened to my chain, earning money for you while you are far away. Go along!"

And seizing her daughter by the arm with convulsive strength, she pushed her roughly, for the first time in her life, repeating, in a low tone:

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

Micheline suffered herself to be put outside the room, and went to her own apartments astonished and frightened. The young wife had hardly left the room when Madame Desvarennes suffered the reaction of the emotion she had just felt. Her nerves were unstrung, and falling on a chair she remained immovable and humbled. Was it possible that her daughter, her adored child, would abandon her to obey the grudges of her hus-

GEORGES OHNET

band? No, Micheline, when back in her room, would remember that she was carrying away all the joy of the house, and that it was cruel to deprive her mother of her only happiness in life.

Slightly reassured, she went down to the office. As she reached the landing, she saw the Prince's servants carrying up trunks belonging to their master to be packed. She felt sick at heart. She understood that this project had been discussed and settled beforehand. It seemed to her that all was over; that her daughter was going away forever, and that she would never see her again. She thought of going to beseech Serge and ask him what sum he would take in exchange for Micheline's liberty; but the haughty and sarcastic face of the Prince forcibly putting the bank-notes in her hands, passed before her, and she guessed that she would not obtain anything. Cast down and despairing, she entered her office and set to work.

The next day, by the evening express, the Prince and Princess left for Nice with all their household, and the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique remained silent and deserted.

CHAPTER XIV

A SUDDEN JOURNEY



T the end of the Promenade des Anglais, on the pleasant road bordered with tamarind-trees, stands, amid a grove of cork-oaks and eucalypti, a charming white villa with pink shutters. A Russian lady, the Countess Woreseff, had it built five years ago, and occupied it one winter. Then, tired of the monotonous noise of the waves beating on the terrace and the brightness of the calm blue sky, she longed for the mists of her native country, and suddenly started for St. Petersburg, leaving that charming residence to be let.

It was there, amid rhododendrons and strawberry-trees in full bloom, that Micheline and Serge had taken up their abode. Until that day the Princess had scarcely travelled. Her mother, always occupied in commercial pursuits, had never left Paris. Micheline had remained with her. During this long journey, accomplished in most luxurious style, she had behaved like a child astonished at everything, and pleased at the least thing. With her face close to the window she saw through the transparent darkness of a lovely winter's night, villages and forests gliding past like phan-

GEORGES OHNET

toms. Afar off, in the depths of the country, she caught sight of a light glimmering, and she loved to picture a family gathered by the fire, the children asleep and the mother working in the silence.

Children! She often thought of them, and never without a sigh of regret rising to her lips. She had been married for some months, and her dreams of becoming a mother had not been realized. How happy she would have been to have a baby, with fair hair, to fondle and kiss! Then the idea of a child reminded her of her own mother. She thought of the deep love one must feel for a child. And the image of the mistress, sad and alone, in the large house of the Rue Saint-Dominique, came to her mind. A vague remorse seized her heart. She felt she had behaved badly. She said to herself: "If, to punish me, Heaven will not grant me a child!" She wept, and soon her grief and trouble vanished with her tears. Sleep overpowered her, and when she awoke it was broad daylight and they were in Provence.

From that moment everything was dazzling. The arrival at Marseilles, the journey along the coast, the approach to Nice, were all matters of ecstasy to Micheline. But it was when the carriage, which was waiting for them at the railway station, stopped at the gates of the villa, that she broke into raptures. She could not feast her eyes enough on the scene which was before her. The blue sea, the sky without a cloud, the white houses rising on the hill amid the dark foliage, and in the distance the mountain-tops covered with snow, and tinged with pink under the brilliant rays of the sun. All this

SERGE PANINE

vigorous and slightly wild nature surprised the Parisienne. It was a new experience. Dazzled by the light and intoxicated with the perfumes, a sort of languor came over her. She soon recovered and became quite strong—something altogether new for her, and she felt thoroughly happy.

The life of the Prince and the Princess became at Nice what it had been in Paris during the early days of their marriage. Visitors flocked to their house. All that the colony could reckon of well-known Parisians and foreigners of high repute presented themselves at the villa. The fêtes recommenced. They gave receptions three times a week; the other evenings Serge went to the Cercle.

This absorbing life had gone on for two months. It was the beginning of February, and already nature was assuming a new appearance under the influence of spring. One evening, three people—two gentlemen and a lady—stepped out of a carriage at the villa gates, and found themselves face to face with a traveller who had come on foot. Two exclamations broke out simultaneously.

“Maréchal!” “Monsieur Savinien!”

“You! at Nice? And by what miracle?”

“A miracle which makes you travel fifteen leagues an hour in exchange for a hundred and thirty-three francs first-class, and is called the Marseilles express!”

“I beg your pardon, my dear friend. I have not introduced you to Monsieur and Mademoiselle Herzog.”

“I have already had the honor of meeting Mademoiselle Herzog at Madame Desvarennes’s,” said Maré-

GEORGES OHNET

chal, bowing to the young girl, without appearing to notice the father.

"You were going to the villa?" asked Savinien. "We, too, were going. But how is my aunt? When did you leave her?"

"I have not left her."

"What's that you say?"

"I say that she is here."

Savinien let his arms drop in profound consternation to show how difficult it was for him to believe what was going on. Then, in a faint treble voice, he said:

"My aunt! At Nice! Promenade des Anglais! That's something more wonderful than the telephone and phonograph! If you had told me that the Panthéon had landed one fine night on the banks of the Paillon, I should not be more astonished. I thought Madame Desvarennes was as deeply rooted in Paris as the Colonne Vendôme! But tell me, what is the object of this journey?"

"A freak."

"Which manifested itself——"

"Yesterday morning at breakfast. Pierre Delarue, who is going to finish his business in Algeria, and then settle in France, came to say 'Good-by' to Madame Desvarennes. A letter arrived from the Princess. She commenced reading it, then all at once she exclaimed: 'Cayrol and his wife arrived at Nice two days ago!' Pierre and I were astonished at the tone in which she uttered these words. She was lost in thought for a few moments, then she said to Pierre: 'You are leaving tonight for Marseilles? Well, I shall go with you. You

SERGE PANINE

will accompany me to Nice.' And turning toward me, she added: 'Maréchal, pack up your portmanteau. I shall take you with me.'"

While speaking, they had walked across the garden, and reached the steps leading to the villa.

"Nothing is easier than to explain this sudden journey," remarked Mademoiselle Herzog. "On learning that Monsieur and Madame Cayrol were at Nice with the Princess, Madame Desvarennes must have felt how very lonely she was in Paris. She had a longing to be near them, and started."

Herzog listened attentively, and seemed to be seeking the connection which should exist between the arrival of the Cayrols and the departure of Madame Desvarennes.

"The funniest thing to me is Maréchal taking a holiday," observed Savinien. "They are still at dinner," he added, entering the drawing-room, through the great doors of which sounds of voices and rattling of plates were heard.

"Well, let us wait for them; we are in agreeable company," said Herzog, turning toward Maréchal, who only answered by a cold bow.

"What are you going to do here, Maréchal?" inquired Savinien. "You will be awfully bored."

"Why? Once in a way I am going to enjoy myself and be a swell. You will teach me, Monsieur Savinien. It cannot be very difficult. It is only necessary to wear a dove-colored coat like you, a gardenia in my button-hole like Monsieur Le Brède, frizzled hair like Monsieur du Tremblay, and to assail the bank at Monaco."

GEORGES OHNET

"Like all these gentlemen," said Suzanne, gayly, "you are a gambler then?"

"I have never touched a card."

"But then you ought to have great good luck," said the young girl.

Herzog had come up to them.

"Will you go partners?" he asked of Maréchal. "We will divide the winnings."

"You are too kind," replied Maréchal, dryly, turning away.

He could not get used to Herzog's familiarity, and there was something in the man which displeased him greatly. There was, he thought, a police-court atmosphere about him.

Suzanne, on the contrary, interested him. The simple, lively, and frank young girl attracted him, and he liked to talk with her. On several occasions, at Madame Desvarennes's, he had been her partner. There was through this a certain intimacy between them which he could not extend to the father.

Herzog had that faculty, fortunately for him, of never appearing offended at what was said to him. He took Savinien's arm in a familiar manner and asked: "Have you noticed that the Prince has looked very preoccupied for the last few days?"

"I don't wonder at it," replied Savinien. "He has been very unlucky at cards. It is all very well for his wife, my charming cousin, to be rich, but if he is going on like that it won't last long!"

The two men withdrew to the window.

Suzanne went up to Maréchal. She had resumed her

SERGE PANINE

thoughtful air. He saw her advancing, and, guessing what she was going to say, felt uncomfortable at having to tell an untruth if he did not wish to hurt her feelings by brutal frankness.

“Monsieur Maréchal,” she began, “how is it that you are always so cold and formal with my father?”

“My dear young lady, there is a great difference between your father and me. I keep my place, that’s all.”

The young girl shook her head sadly.

“It is not that; you are amiable and ever friendly with me——”

“You are a woman, and the least politeness——”

“No! My father must have hurt your feelings unwittingly; for he is very good. I have asked him, and he did not seem to understand what I meant. But my questions drew his attention to you. He thinks highly of you and would like to see you filling a position more in harmony with your merit. You know that Monsieur Cayrol and my father have just launched a tremendous undertaking?”

“The ‘Crédit Européen?’”

“Yes. They will have offices in all the commercial centres of European commerce. Would you like the management of one of these branches?”

“I, Mademoiselle?” cried Maréchal, astonished, and already asking himself what interest Herzog could have in making him leave the house of Desvarennes.

“The enterprise is colossal,” continued Suzanne, “and frightens me at times. Is it necessary to be so rich? I would like my father to retire from these enormous speculations into which he has thrown himself,

GEORGES OHNET

body and soul. I have simple tastes. My father wishes to make a tremendous fortune for me, he says. All he undertakes is for me, I know. It seems to me that he runs a great risk. That is why I am talking to you. I am very superstitious, and I fancy if you were with us it would bring us luck."

Suzanne, while speaking, had leaned toward Maréchal. Her face reflected the seriousness of her thoughts. Her lovely eyes implored. The young man asked himself how this charming girl could belong to that horrible Herzog.

"Believe me that I am deeply touched, Mademoiselle, by the favor you have done me," said he, with emotion. "I owe it solely to your kindness, I know; but I do not belong to myself. I am bound to Madame Desvarennes by stronger ties than those of interest—those of gratitude."

"You refuse?" she cried, painfully.

"I must."

"The position you fill is humble."

"I was very glad to accept it at a time when my daily bread was not certain."

"You have been reduced," said the young girl, with trembling voice, "to such——"

"Wretchedness. Yes, Mademoiselle, my outset in life was hard. I am without relations. Mother Maréchal, a kind fruiteer of the Rue Pavée au Marais, found me one morning by the curbstone, rolled in a number of the *Constitutionnel*, like an old pair of boots. The good woman took me home, brought me up and sent me to college. I must tell you that I was very suc-

SERGE PANINE

cessful and gained a scholarship. I won all the prizes. Yes, and I had to sell my gilt-edged books from the Lycée Charlemagne in the days of distress. I was eighteen when my benefactress, Mother Maréchal, died. I was without help or succor. I tried to get along by myself. After ten years of struggling and privations I felt physical and moral vigor giving way. I looked around me and saw those who overcame obstacles were stronger than I. I felt that I was doomed not to make way in the world, not being one of those who could command, so I resigned myself to obey. I fill a humble position as you know, but one which satisfies my wants. I am without ambition. A little philosophical, I observe all that goes on around me. I live happily like Diogenes in his tub."

"You are a wise man," resumed Suzanne. "I, too, am a philosopher, and I live amid surroundings which do not please me. I, unfortunately, lost my mother when I was very young, and although my father is very kind, he has been obliged to neglect me a little. I see around me people who are millionaires or who aspire to be. I am doomed to receive the attentions of such men as Le Brède and Du Tremblay—empty-headed coxcombs, who court my money, and to whom I am not a woman, but a sack of ducats trimmed with lace."

"These gentlemen are the modern Argonauts. They are in search of the Golden Fleece," observed Maréchal.

"The Argonauts!" cried Suzanne, laughing. "You are right. I shall never call them anything else."

"Oh, they will not understand you!" said Maréchal, gayly. "I don't think they know much of mythology."

GEORGES OHNET

"Well, you see I am not very happy in the bosom of riches," continued the young girl. "Do not abandon me. Come and talk with me sometimes. You will not chatter trivialities. It will be a change from the others."

And, nodding pleasantly to Maréchal, Mademoiselle Herzog joined her father, who was gleaning details about the house of Desvarennnes from Savinien.

The secretary remained silent for a moment.

"Strange girl!" he murmured. "What a pity she has such a father."

The door of the room in which Monsieur and Mademoiselle Herzog, Maréchal and Savinien were, opened, and Madame Desvarennnes entered, followed by her daughter, Cayrol, Serge and Pierre. The room, at the extreme end of the villa, was square, surrounded on three sides by a gallery shut in by glass and stocked with greenhouse plants. Lofty archways, half veiled with draperies, led to the gallery. This room had been the favorite one of Countess Woreseff. She had furnished it in Oriental style, with low seats and large divans, inviting one to rest and dream during the heat of the day. In the centre of the apartment was a large ottoman, the middle of which formed a flower-stand. Steps led down from the gallery to the terrace whence there was a most charming view of sea and land.

On seeing his aunt enter, Savinien rushed forward and seized both her hands. Madame Desvarennnes's arrival was an element of interest in his unoccupied life. The dandy guessed at some mysterious business and thought it possible that he might get to know it. With

SERGE PANINE

open ears and prying eyes, he sought the meaning of the least words.

"If you knew, my dear aunt, how surprised I am to see you here," he exclaimed in his hypocritical way.

"Not more so than I am to find myself here," said she, with a smile. "But, bah! I have slipped my traces for a week."

"And what are you going to do here?" continued Savinien.

"What everybody does. By-the-bye, what do they do?" asked Madame Desvarennes, with vivacity.

"That depends," answered the Prince. "There are two distinct populations here. On the one hand, those who take care of themselves; on the other, those who enjoy themselves. For the former there is the constitutional every morning in the sun, with slow measured steps on the Promenade des Anglais. For the latter there are excursions, races, regattas. The first economize their life like misers; the second waste it like prodigals. Then night comes on, and the air grows cold. Those who take care of themselves go home, those who amuse themselves go out. The first put on dressing-gowns; the second put on ball-dresses. Here, the house is quiet, lit up by a night-light; there, the rooms sparkle with light, and resound with the noise of music and dancing. Here they cough, there they laugh. Infusion on the one hand, punch on the other. In fact, everywhere and always, a contrast. Nice is at once the saddest and the gayest town. One dies of overenjoyment, and one amuses one's self at the risk of dying."

"A sojourn here is very dangerous, then?"

GEORGES OHNET

"Oh! aunt, not so dangerous, nor, above all, so amusing as the Prince says. We are a set of jolly fellows, who kill time between the dining-room of the hotel, pigeon-shooting, and the Cercle, which is not so very amusing after all."

"The dining-room is bearable," said Maréchal, "but pigeon-shooting must in time become——"

"We put some interest into the game."

"How so?"

"Oh! It is very simple: a gentleman with a gun in his hand stands before the boxes which contain the pigeons. You say to me: 'I bet fifty louis that the bird will fall.' I answer, 'Done.' The gentleman calls out, 'Pull;' the box opens, the pigeon flies, the shot follows. The bird falls or does not fall. I lose or win fifty louis."

"Most interesting!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Herzog.

"Pshaw!" said Savinien with ironical indifference, "it takes the place of 'trente et quarante,' and is better than 'odd or even' on the numbers of the cabs which pass."

"And what do the pigeons say to that?" asked Pierre, seriously.

"They are not consulted," said Serge, gayly.

"Then there are races and regattas," continued Savinien.

"In which case you bet on the horses?" interrupted Maréchal.

"Or on the boats."

"In fact, betting is applied to all circumstances of life?"

SERGE PANINE

"Exactly; and to crown all, we have the Cercle, where we go in the evening. Baccarat triumphs there. It is not very varied either: A hundred louis? Done—Five. I draw. There are some people who draw at five. Nine, I show up, I win or I lose, and the game continues."

"And that amid the glare of gas and the smoke of tobacco," said Maréchal, "when the nights are so splendid and the orange-trees smell so sweetly. What a strange existence!"

"An existence for idiots, Maréchal," sighed Savinien, "that I, a man of business, must submit to, through my aunt's domineering ways! You know now how men of pleasure spend their lives, my friend, and you might write a substantial *résumé* entitled, 'The Fool's Breviary.' I am sure it would sell well."

Madame Desvarennes, who had heard the last words, was no longer listening. She was lost in a deep reverie. She was much altered since grief and trouble had come upon her; her face was worn, her temples hollow, her chin was more prominent. Her eyes had sunk into her head, and were surrounded by dark rims.

Serge, leaning against the wall near the window, was observing her. He was wondering with secret anxiety what had brought Madame Desvarennes so suddenly to his house after a separation of two months, during which time she had scarcely written to Micheline. Was the question of money to be resumed? Since the morning Madame had been smiling, calm and pleased like a schoolgirl home for her holidays. This was the first

GEORGES OHNET

time she had allowed a sad expression to rest on her face. Her gayety was feigned then.

A look crossing his made him start. Jeanne had just turned her eyes toward him. For a second they met his own. Serge could not help shuddering. Jeanne was calling his attention to Madame Desvarennes; she, too, was observing her. Was it on their account she had come to Nice? Had their secret fallen into her hands? He resolved to find out.

Jeanne had turned away her eyes from him. He could feast his on her now. She had become more beautiful. The tone of her complexion had become warmer. Her figure had developed. Serge longed to call her his own. For a moment his hands trembled; his throat was dry, his heart seemed to stop beating.

He tried to shake off this attraction, and walked to the centre of the room. At the same time visitors were announced. Le Brède, with his inseparable friend, Du Tremblay, escorting Lady Harton, Serge's beautiful cousin, who had caused Micheline some anxiety on the day of her marriage, but whom she no longer feared; then the Prince and Princess Odescalchi, Venetian nobles, followed by Monsieur Clément Souverain, a young Belgian, starter of the Nice races, a great pigeon shot, and a mad leader of cotillons.

"Oh, dear me! my lady, all in black?" said Micheline, pointing to the tight-fitting black satin worn by the English beauty.

"Yes, my dear Princess; mourning," replied Lady Harton, with a vigorous shake of the hands. "Ball-

SERGE PANINE

room mourning—one of my best partners; gentlemen, you know Harry Tornwall?"

"Countess Alberti's cavalier?" added Serge.
"Well?"

"Well! he has just killed himself."

A concert of exclamations arose in the drawing-room, and the visitors suddenly surrounded her.

"What! did you not know? It was the sole topic of conversation at Monaco to-day. Poor Tornwall, being completely cleared out, went during the night to the park belonging to the villa occupied by Countess Alberti, and blew his brains out under her window."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Micheline.

"It was very bad taste on your countryman's part," observed Serge.

"The Countess was furious, and said that Tornwall's coming to her house to kill himself proved clearly to her that he did *not* know how to behave."

"Do you wish to prevent those who are cleared out from blowing out their brains?" inquired Cayrol. "Compel the pawnbrokers of Monaco to lend a louis on all pistols."

"Well," retorted young Monsieur Souverain, "when the louis is lost the players will still be able to hang themselves."

"Yes," concluded Maréchal, "then at any rate the rope will bring luck to others."

"Gentlemen, do you know that what you have been relating to us is very doleful?" said Suzanne Herzog. "Suppose, to vary our impressions, you were to ask us to waltz?"

GEORGES OHNET

"Yes, on the terrace," said Le Brède, warmly. "A curtain of orange-trees will protect us from the vulgar gaze."

"Oh! Mademoiselle, what a dream!" sighed Du Tremblay, approaching Suzanne. "Waltzing with you! By moonlight."

"Yes, friend Pierrot!" sang Suzanne, bursting into a laugh.

Already the piano, vigorously attacked by Pierre, desirous of making himself useful since he could not be agreeable, was heard in the next room. Serge had slowly approached Jeanne.

"Will you do me the favor of dancing with me?" he asked, softly.

The young woman started; her cheeks became pale, and in a sharp tone she answered:

"Why don't you ask your wife?"

Serge smiled.

"You or nobody."

Jeanne raised her eyes boldly, and looking at him in the face, said, defiantly:

"Well, then, nobody!"

And, rising, she took the arm of Cayrol, who was advancing toward her.

The Prince remained motionless for a moment, following them with his eyes. Then, seeing his wife alone with Madame Desvarennes, he went out on the terrace. Already the couples were dancing on the polished marble. Joyful bursts of laughter rose in the perfumed air that sweet March night. A deep sorrow came over Serge; an intense disgust with all things. The sea

SERGE PANINE

sparkled, lit up by the moon. He had a mad longing to seize Jeanne in his arms and carry her far away from the world, across that immense calm space which seemed made expressly to rock sweetly eternal loves.

CHAPTER XV

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER



MICHELINE intended following her husband, but Madame Desvarennnes, without rising, took hold of her hand.

"Stay with me for a little while," she said, tenderly. "We have scarcely exchanged ten words since my arrival. Come, tell me, are you pleased to see me?"

"How can you ask me that?" answered Micheline, seating herself on the sofa beside her mother.

"I ask you so that you may tell me so," resumed Madame Desvarennnes, softly. "I know what you think, but that is not enough." She added pleadingly:

"Kiss me, will you?"

Micheline threw her arms round her mother's neck, saying, "Dear mamma!" which made tears spring to the tortured mother's eyes. She folded her daughter in her arms, and clasped her as a miser holds his treasure.

"It is a long time since I have heard you speak thus to me. Two months! And I have been desolate in that large house you used to fill alone in the days gone by."

The young wife interrupted her mother, reproachfully:

"Oh! mamma; I beg you to be reasonable."

"To be reasonable? In other words, I suppose you

SERGE PANINE

mean that I am to get accustomed to living without you, after having for twenty years devoted my life to you? Bear, without complaining, that my happiness should be taken away, and now that I am old lead a life without aim, without joy, without trouble even, because I know if you had any troubles you would not tell me!"

There was a moment's pause. Then Micheline, in a constrained manner, said:

"What griefs could I have?"

Madame Desvarennnes lost all patience, and giving vent to her feelings exclaimed, bitterly:

"Those which your husband causes you!"

Micheline arose abruptly.

"Mother!" she cried.

But the mistress had commenced, and with unrestrained bitterness, went on:

"That gentleman has behaved toward me in such a manner as to shake my confidence in him! After vowing that he would never separate you from me, he brought you here, knowing that I could not leave Paris."

"You are unjust," retorted Micheline. "You know the doctors ordered me to go to Nice."

"Pooh! You can make doctors order you anything you like!" resumed her mother, excitedly, and shaking her head disdainfully. "Your husband said to our good Doctor Rigaud: 'Don't you think that a season in the South would do my wife good?' The doctor answered: 'If it does not do her any good it certainly won't do her any harm.' Then your husband added:

GEORGES OHNET

‘Just take a sheet of paper and write out a prescription. You understand? It is for my mother-in-law, who will not be pleased at our going away.’”

And as Micheline seemed to doubt what her mother was saying, the latter added:

“The doctor told me when I went to see him about it. I never had much faith in doctors, and now——”

Micheline felt she was on delicate ground, and wanted to change the subject. She soothed her mother as in days gone by, saying:

“Come, mamma; will you never be able to get used to your part? Must you always be jealous? You know all wives leave their mothers to follow their husbands. It is the law of nature. You, in your day, remember, followed your husband, and your mother must have wept.”

“Did my mother love me as I love you?” asked Madame Desvarennes, impetuously. “I was brought up differently. We had not time to love each other so much. We had to work. The happiness of spoiling one’s child is a privilege of the rich. For you there was no down warm enough or silk soft enough to line your cradle. You have been petted and worshipped for twenty years. Yet, it only needed a man, whom you scarcely knew six months ago, to make you forget everything.”

“I have not forgotten anything,” replied Micheline, moved by these passionate expressions. “And in my heart you still hold the same place.”

The mistress looked at the young wife, then, in a sad tone, said:

SERGE PANINE

"It is no longer the first place."

This simple, selfish view made Micheline smile.

"It is just like you, you tyrant!" she exclaimed.
"You must be first. Come, be satisfied with equality!
Remember that you were first in the field, and that for
twenty years I have loved you, while he has to make up
for lost time. Don't try to make a comparison between
my love for him and my affection for you. Be kind:
instead of looking black at him, try to love him. I
should be so happy to see you united, and to be able,
without reservation, to think of you both with the same
tenderness!"

"Ah! how you talk me over. How charming and
caressing you can be when you like. And how happy
Serge ought to be with a wife like you! It is al-
ways the way; men like him always get the best
wives."

"I don't suppose, mamma, you came all the way
from Paris to run down my husband to me."

Madame Desvarennes became serious again.

"No; I came to defend you."

Micheline looked surprised.

"It is time for me to speak. You are seriously men-
aced," continued the mother.

"In my love?" asked the young wife, in an altered
tone.

"No; in your fortune."

Micheline smiled superbly.

"If that be all!"

This indifference made her mother positively jump.

"You speak very coolly about it! At the rate your

GEORGES OHNET

husband is spending, there will be nothing left of your dowry in six months."

"Well!" said the Princess, gayly, "you will give us another."

Madame Desvarennes assumed her cold business-like manner.

"Ta! ta! ta! Do you think there is no limit to my resources? I gave you four millions when you were married, represented by fifteen hundred thousand francs, in good stock, a house in the Rue de Rivoli, and eight hundred thousand francs which I prudently kept in the business, and for which I pay you interest. The fifteen hundred thousand francs have vanished. My lawyer came to tell me that the house in the Rue de Rivoli had been sold without a reinvestment taking place."

The mistress stopped. She had spoken in that frank, determined way of hers that was part of her strength. She looked fixedly at Micheline, and asked:

"Did you know this, my girl?"

The Princess, deeply troubled, because now it was not a question of sentiment, but of serious moment, answered, in a low tone:

"No, mamma."

"How is that possible?" Madame Desvarennes demanded, hotly. "Nothing can be done without your signature."

"I gave it," murmured Micheline.

"You gave it!" repeated the mistress in a tone of anger. "When?"

"The day after my marriage."

SERGE PANINE

"Your husband had the impudence to ask for it the day after your marriage?"

Micheline smiled.

"He did not ask for it, mamma," she replied, with sweetness; "I offered it to him. You had settled all on me."

"Prudently! With a fellow like your husband!"

"Your mistrust must have been humiliating to him. I was ashamed of it. I said nothing to you, because I knew you would rather prevent the marriage, and I loved Serge. I, therefore, signed the contract which you had had prepared. Only the next day I gave a general power of attorney to my husband."

Madame Desvarennnes's anger was over. She was observing Micheline, and wished to find out the depth of the abyss into which her daughter had thrown herself with blind confidence.

"And what did he say then?" she inquired.

"Nothing," answered Micheline, simply. "Tears came to his eyes, and he kissed me. I saw that this delicacy touched his heart and I was happy. There, mamma," she added with eyes sparkling at the remembrance of the pleasure she had experienced, "he may spend as much as he likes; I am amply repaid beforehand."

Madame Desvarennnes shrugged her shoulders, and said:

"My dear child, you are mad enough to be locked up. What is there about the fellow to turn every woman's brain?"

GEORGES OHNET

"Every woman's?" exclaimed Micheline, anxiously, looking at her mother.

"That is a manner of speaking. But, my dear, you must understand that I cannot be satisfied with what you have just told me. A tear and a kiss! Bah! That is not worth your dowry."

"Come, mamma, do let me be happy."

"You can be happy without committing follies. You do not need a racing-stable."

"Oh, he has chosen such pretty colors," interrupted Micheline, with a smile. "Pearl-gray and silver, and pink cap. It is charming!"

"You think so? Well, you are not difficult to please. And the club? What do you say to his gambling?"

Micheline turned pale, and with a constraint which hurt her mother, said:

"Is it necessary to make a fuss about a few games at bouillotte?"

This continual defense of Serge exasperated Madame Desvarennes.

"Don't talk to me," she continued, violently. "I am well informed on that subject. He leaves you alone every evening to go and play with gentlemen who turn up the king with a dexterity the Legitimists must envy. My dear, shall I tell you his fortune? He commenced with cards; he continues with horses; he will finish with worthless women!"

"Mamma!" cried Micheline, wounded to the heart.

"And your money will pay the piper! But, happily, I am here to put your household matters right. I am

SERGE PANINE

going to keep your gentleman so well under that in future he will walk straight, I'll warrant you!"

Micheline rose and stood before her mother, looking so pale that the latter was frightened.

"Mother," she said, in trembling tones, "if ever you say one word to my husband, take care! I shall never see you again!"

Madame Desvarennes flinched before her daughter. It was no longer the weak Micheline who trusted to her tears, but a vehement woman ready to defend him whom she loved. And as she remained silent, not daring to speak again:

"Mother," continued Micheline, with sadness, yet firmly, "this explanation was inevitable; I have suffered beforehand, knowing that I should have to choose between my affection for my husband and my respect for you."

"Between the one and the other," said the mistress, bitterly, "you don't hesitate, I see."

"It is my duty; and if I failed in it, you yourself, with your good sense, would see it."

"Oh! Micheline, could I have expected to find you thus?" cried the mother, in despair. "What a change! It is not you who are speaking; it is not my daughter. Fool that you are! Don't you see whither you are being led? You, yourself, are preparing your own misfortune. Don't think that my words are inspired by jealousy. A higher sentiment dictates them, and at this moment my maternal love gives me, I fear, a foresight of the future. There is only just time to rescue you from the danger into which you are running. You hope

GEORGES OHNET

to retain your husband by your generosity? There where you think you are giving proofs of love he will only see proofs of weakness. If you make yourself cheap he will count you as nothing. If you throw yourself at his feet he will trample on you."

The Princess shook her head haughtily, and smiled.

"You don't know him, mamma. He is a gentleman; he understands all these delicacies, and there is more to be gained by submitting one's self to his discretion, than by trying to resist his will. You blame his manner of existence, but you don't understand him. I know him. He belongs to a different race than you and I. He needs refinements of luxury which would be useless to us, but the deprivation of which would be hard to him. He suffered much when he was poor, he is making up for it now. We are guilty of some extravagances, 'tis true; but what does it matter? For whom have you made a fortune? For me! For what object? My happiness! Well, I am happy to surround my Prince with the glory and pomp which suits him so well. He is grateful to me; he loves me, and I hold his love dearer than all else in the world; for if ever he ceases to love me I shall die!"

"Micheline!" cried Madame Desvarennes, beside herself, and seizing her daughter with nervous strength.

The young wife quietly allowed her fair head to fall on her mother's shoulder, and whispered faintly in her ear:

"You don't want to wreck my life. I understand your displeasure. It is natural; I feel it. You cannot think otherwise than you do, being a simple, hard-working woman; but I beg of you to banish all hatred, and

SERGE PANINE

confine these ideas within yourself. Say nothing more about them for love of me!"

The mother was vanquished. She had never been able to resist that suppliant voice.

"Ah! cruel child," she moaned, "what pain you are causing me!"

"You consent, don't you, dear mother?" murmured Micheline, falling into the arms of her by whom she knew she was adored.

"I will do as you wish," said Madame Desvarennes, kissing her daughter's hair—that golden hair which, in former days, she loved to stroke.

The strains of the piano sounded on the terrace. In the shade, groups of merry dancers were enjoying themselves. Happy voices were heard approaching, and Savinien, followed by Maréchal and Suzanne, came briskly up the steps.

"Oh, aunt, it is not fair," said the dandy. "If you have come here to monopolize Micheline, you will be sent back to Paris. We want a vis-à-vis for a quadrille. Come, Princess, it is delightfully cool outside, and I am sure you will enjoy it."

"Monsieur Le Brède has gathered some oranges, and is trying to play at cup and ball with them on his nose, while his friend, Monsieur du Tremblay, jealous of his success, talks of illuminating the trees with bowls of punch," said Maréchal.

"And what is Serge doing?" inquired Micheline, smiling.

"He is talking to my wife on the terrace," said Cayrol, appearing in the gallery.

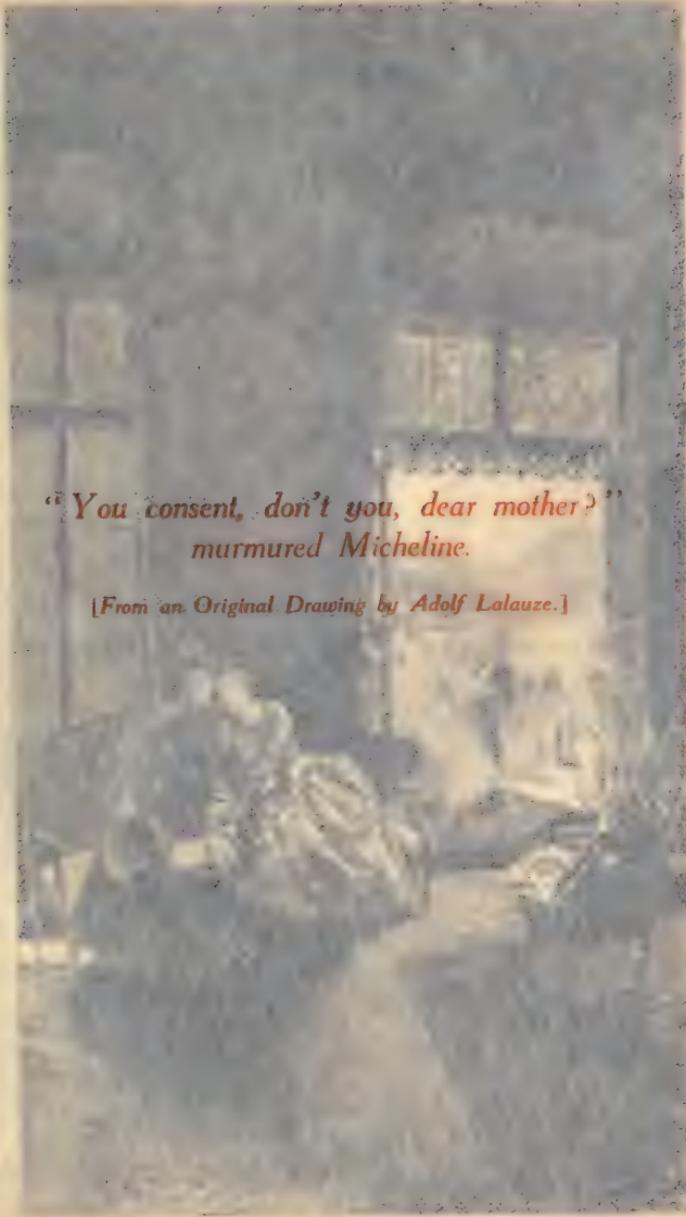
GEORGES OHNET

The young people went off and were lost in the darkness. Madame Desvarennes looked at Cayrol. He was happy and calm. There was no trace of his former jealousy. During the six months which had elapsed since his marriage, the banker had observed his wife closely, her actions, her words: nothing had escaped him. He had never found her at fault. Thus, reassured, he had given her his confidence and this time forever. Jeanne was adorable; he loved her more than ever. She seemed very much changed to him. Her disposition, formerly somewhat harsh, had softened, and the haughty, capricious girl had become a mild, demure, and somewhat serious woman. Unable to read his companion's thoughts, Cayrol sincerely believed that he had been unnecessarily anxious, and that Jeanne's troubles had only been passing fancies. He took credit of the change in his wife to himself, and was proud of it.

"Cayrol, oblige me by removing that lamp; it hurts my eyes," said Madame Desvarennes, anxious that the traces on her face, caused by her late discussion with her daughter, should not be visible. "Then ask Jeanne to come here for a few minutes. I have something to say to her."

"Certainly," said Cayrol, taking the lamp off the table and carrying it into the adjoining room.

Darkness did Madame Desvarennes good. It refreshed her mind and calmed her brow. The noise of dancing reached her. She commenced thinking. So it had vainly tried to prove to her that a life of immoderate pleasure was not conducive to happiness. The



"You consent, don't you, dear mother?"
murmured Micheline.

[From an Original Drawing by Adolf Lalauze.]

ADAM'S OINET

He was about to turn off and re-enter his room, when Desvarennes took him by the arm. "Be patient," said he. "There was no fault of the former husband; but during the six months which had elapsed since their marriage, the husband had deserved his wife's accusations, her words had escaped her, and never found her at home. Thus, reason and justice had given her his confession and this time her husband was altogether to break her heart more than ever. She would very much reproach me here. Therefore, I must go to my wife, and tell her all that has passed, and the gravity, importance, and interest of a mild

"Chardin et son ami Vérité Amour, ou l'Amour et la vérité au printemps de l'Amour." *Madame Béatrix*, and that *"I wanted them to separate Amour and vérité."* He told her of the change in his wife to himself, and went back to his room.

He did not sleep well by removing that lamp; it bothered Madame Desvarennes, and she thought that the light caused by her late discussion with Adam would not be visible. "Then ask Jeanne to come over to us in two minutes. I have something to say to you."

"Very well," said Chéry, taking the lamp off the window-sill, and entering the adjoining room.

Desvarennes' wife, Madame Béatrix, was seated in a chair, with hands clasped, and raised her brows, as if daring to look him. Her countenance was pale, and her eyes had a mournful, timid expression. "I am going to tell you something which will interest you, and which will give you an opportunity of pleasure and conductive to happiness. The



SERGE PANINE

young wife had stopped her ears so that she might not hear, and closed her eyes that she might not see. Her mother asked herself if she did not exaggerate the evil. Alas! no. She saw that she was not mistaken. Examining the society around her, men and women: everywhere was feverish excitement, dissipation, and nullity. You might rummage through their brains without finding one practical idea; in all their hearts, there was not one lofty aspiration. These people, in their daily life were like squirrels in a cage, and because they moved, they thought they were progressing. In them scepticism had killed belief; religion, family, country, were, as they phrased it, all humbug. They had only one aim, one passion—to enjoy themselves. Their watchword was "pleasure." All those who did not perish of consumption would die in lunatic asylums.

What was she doing in the midst of this rotteness? She, the woman of business? Could she hope to regenerate these poor wretches by her example? No! She could not teach them to be good, and they excelled in teaching others harm. She must leave this gilded vice, taking with her those she loved, and leave the idle and incompetent to consume and destroy themselves.

She felt disgusted, and resolved to do all to tear Mi-cheline away from the contagion. In the meantime she must question Jeanne. A shadow appeared on the threshold: it was hers. In the darkness of the gallery Serge crept behind her without being seen. He had been watching Jeanne, and seeing her go away alone, had followed her. In the angle of the large bay-window, opening into the garden, he waited with palpitating

GEORGES OHNET

heart. Madame Desvarennes's voice was heard in the silence of the drawing-room; he listened.

"Sit down, Jeanne; our interview will be short, and it could not be delayed, for to-morrow I shall not be here."

"You are leaving so soon?"

"Yes; I only left Paris on my daughter's account, and on yours. My daughter knows what I had to tell her; now it is your turn! Why did you come to Nice?"

"I could not do otherwise."

"Because?"

"Because my husband wished it."

"You ought to have made him wish something else. Your power over him is absolute."

There was a moment's pause. Then Jeanne answered:

"I feared to insist lest I should awaken his suspicions."

"Good! But admitting that you came to Nice, why accept hospitality in this house?"

"Micheline offered it to us," said Jeanne.

"And even that did not make you refuse. What part do you purpose playing here? After six months of honesty, are you going to change your mind?"

Serge, behind his shelter, shuddered. Madame Desvarennes's words were clear. She knew all.

Jeanne's voice was indignant when she replied:

"By what right do you insult me by such a suspicion?"

"By the right which you have given me in not keeping to your bargain. You ought to have kept out of the

SERGE PANINE

way, and I find you here, seeking danger and already trying those flirtations which are the forerunners of sin, and familiarizing yourself with evil before wholly giving yourself up to it."

"Madame!" cried Jeanne, passionately.

"Answer! Have you kept the promise you made me?"

"Have the hopes which you held out to me been realized?" replied Jeanne, with despair. "For six months I have been away, and have I found peace of mind and heart? The duty which you pointed out to me as a remedy for the pain which tortured me I have fruitlessly followed. I have wept, hoping that the trouble within me would be washed away with my tears. I have prayed to Heaven, and asked that I might love my husband. But, no! That man is as odious to me as ever. Now I have lost all my illusions, and find myself joined to him for the rest of my days! I have to tell lies, to wear a mask, to smile! It is revolting, and I suffer! Now that you know what is passing within me, judge, and say whether your reproaches are not a useless cruelty."

On hearing Jeanne, Madame Desvarennes felt herself moved with deep pity. She asked herself whether it was not unjust for that poor child to suffer so much. She had never done anything wrong, and her conduct was worthy of esteem.

"Unhappy woman!" she said.

"Yes, unhappy, indeed," resumed Jeanne, "because I have nothing to cling to, nothing to sustain me. My mind is afflicted with feverish thoughts, my heart

GEORGES OHNET

made desolate with bitter regrets. My will alone protects me, and in a moment of weakness it may betray me."

"You still love him?" asked Madame Desvarennes, in a deep voice which made Serge quiver.

"Do I know? There are times when I think I hate him. What I have endured since I have been here is incredible! Everything galls me, irritates me. My husband is blind, Micheline unsuspecting, and Serge smiles quietly, as if he were preparing some treachery. Jealousy, anger, contempt, are all conflicting within me. I feel that I ought to go away, and still I feel a horrible delight in remaining."

"Poor child!" said Madame Desvarennes. "I pity you from my soul. Forgive my unjust words; you have done all in your power. You have had momentary weaknesses like all human beings. You must be helped, and may rely on me. I will speak to your husband to-morrow; he shall take you away. Lacking happiness, you must have peace. Go; you are a brave heart, and if Heaven be just, you will be rewarded."

Serge heard the sound of a kiss. In an embrace, the mother had blessed her adopted daughter. Then the Prince saw Madame Desvarennes go slowly past him. And the silence was broken only by the sobs of Jeanne who was half lying on the sofa in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TELLTALE KISS



ERGE slipped from his hiding-place and came toward Jeanne. The carpet deadened the sound of his steps. The young woman was gazing into vacancy and breathing with difficulty. He looked at her for a moment without speaking; then, leaning over her shoulder.

"Is it true, Jeanne," he murmured, softly, "that you hate me?"

Jeanne arose, bewildered, exclaiming,
"Serge!"

"Yes, Serge," answered the Prince, "who has never ceased to love you."

A deep blush spread over the young woman's face.
"Leave me," she said. "Your language is unworthy of a man. I will not listen to you."

And with a quick step she walked toward the gallery. Serge threw himself in her way, saying:

"You must stop; you cannot escape me."
"But this is madness," exclaimed Jeanne, moving away. "Do you forget where we are?"

"Do you forget what you have just been saying?" retorted Serge. "I was there; I did not miss a word."

"If you heard me," said Jeanne, "you know that

GEORGES OHNET

everything separates us. My duty, yours, and my will."

"A will which is enforced, and against which your heart rebels. A will to which I will not submit."

As he spoke, Serge advanced toward her, trying to seize her in his arms.

"Take care!" replied Jeanne. "Micheline and my husband are there. You must be mad to forget it. If you come a step farther I shall call out."

"Call, then!" cried Serge, clasping her in his arms.

Jeanne tried to free herself from him, but could not.

"Serge," she said, paling with mingled anguish and rapture in the arms of him whom she adored, "what you are doing is cowardly and base!"

A kiss stopped the words on her lips. Jeanne felt herself giving way. She made a supreme effort.

"I won't, Serge!" she stammered. "Have mercy!"

Tears of shame rolled down her face.

"No! you belong to me. The other, your husband, stole you from me. I take you back. I love you!"

The young woman fell on a seat.

Serge repeated,

"I love you! I love you! I love you!"

A fearful longing took possession of Jeanne. She no longer pushed away the arms which clasped her. She placed her hands on Serge's shoulder, and with a deep sigh gave herself up.

A profound silence reigned around. Suddenly a sound of approaching voices roused them, and at the same moment the heavy curtain which separated the room from the adjoining drawing-room was lifted. A

SERGE PANINE

shadow appeared on the threshold, as they were still in each other's arms. The stifled exclamation, "O God!" followed by a sob of agony, resounded. The door curtain fell, surrounding with its folds the unknown witness of that terrible scene.

Jeanne had risen, trying to collect her ideas. A sudden light dawned on her mind; she realized in a moment the extent of her crime, and uttering a cry of horror and despair, she escaped, followed by Serge, through the gallery.

Then the heavy curtain was lifted again, and tottering, livid, almost dead, Micheline entered the room. Pierre, serious and cold, walked behind her. The Princess, feeling tired, had come into the house. Chance had led her there to witness this proof of misfortune and treason.

Both she and Delarue looked at each other, silent and overwhelmed. Their thoughts whirled through their brains with fearful rapidity. In a moment they looked back on their existence. He saw the pale betrothed of whom he had dreamed as a wife, who had willingly given herself to another, and who now found herself so cruelly punished. She measured the distance which separated these two men: the one good, loyal, generous; the other selfish, base, and unworthy. And seeing him whom she adored, so vile and base compared to him whom she had disdained, Micheline burst into bitter tears.

Pierre tremblingly hastened toward her. The Princess made a movement to check him, but she saw on the face of her childhood's friend such sincere grief and honest indignation, that she felt as safe with him as if

GEORGES OHNET

he had really been her brother. Overcome, she let her head fall on his shoulder, and wept.

The sound of approaching footsteps made Micheline arise. She recognized her husband's step, and hastily seizing Pierre's hand, said:

"Never breathe a word; forget what you have seen."

Then, with deep grief, she added:

"If Serge knew that I had seen him unawares he would never forgive me!"

Drying her tears, and still tottering from the shock, she left the room. Pierre remained alone, quite stunned; pitying, yet blaming the poor woman, who, in her outraged love, still had the absurd courage to hold her tongue and to resign herself. Anger seized on him, and the more timid Micheline seemed herself, the more violent and passionate he felt.

Serge came back to the room. After the first moment of excitement, he had reflected, and wanted to know by whom he had been observed. Was it Madame Desvarennes, Micheline, or Cayrol, who had come in? At this idea he trembled, measuring the possible results of the imprudence he had been guilty of. He resolved to face the difficulty if it were either of these three interested parties, and to impose silence if he had to deal with an indifferent person. He took the lamp which Madame Desvarennes had a short time before asked Cayrol to remove and went into the room. Pierre was there alone.

The two men measured each other with their looks. Delarue guessed the anxiety of Serge, and the Prince understood the hostility of Pierre. He turned pale.

SERGE PANINE

"It was you who came in?" he asked, boldly.

"Yes," replied Pierre, with severity.

The Prince hesitated for a second. He was evidently seeking a polite form to express his request. He did not find one, and in a threatening manner, he resumed:

"You must hold your tongue, otherwise——"

"Otherwise?" inquired Pierce, aggressively.

"What is the use of threats?" replied Serge, already calmed. "Excuse me; I know that you will not tell; if not for my sake at least for that of others."

"Yes, for others," said Pierre, passionately; "for others whom you have basely sacrificed, and who deserve all your respect and love; for Madame Desverennes, whose high intelligence you have not been able to understand; for Micheline, whose tender heart you have not been able to appreciate. Yes, for their sakes I will hold my peace, not out of regard for you, because you neither deserve consideration nor esteem."

The Prince advanced a step, and exclaimed:

"Pierre!"

Pierre did not move, and looking Serge in the face, continued:

"The truth is unpleasant to you, still you must hear it. You act according to your fancies. Principles and morals, to which all men submit, are dead letters to you. Your own pleasure above all things, and always! That is your rule, eh? and so much the worse if ruin and trouble to others are the consequences? You only have to deal with two women, and you profit by it. But I warn you that if you continue to crush them I will be their defender."

GEORGES OHNET

Serge had listened to all this with disdainful impassibility, and when Pierre had finished, he smiled, snapped his fingers, and turning toward the young man:

"My dear fellow," said he, "allow me to tell you that I think you are very impertinent. You come here meddling with my affairs. What authority have you? Are you a relative? A connection? By what right do you preach this sermon?"

As he concluded, Serge seated himself and laughed with a careless air.

Pierre answered, gravely:

"I was betrothed to Micheline when she saw and loved you: that is my right! I could have married her, but sacrificed my love to hers: that is my authority! And it is in the name of my shattered hopes and lost happiness that I call you to account for her future peace."

Serge had risen, he was deeply embittered at what Delarue had just told him, and was trying to recover his calmness. Pierre, trembling with emotion and anger, was also striving to check their influence.

"It seems to me," said the Prince, mockingly, "that in your claim there is more than the outcry of an irritated conscience; it is the complaint of a heart that still loves."

"And if that were so?" retorted Pierre. "Yes, I love her, but with a pious love, from the depth of my soul, as one would love a saint; and I only suffer the more to see her suffering."

Somewhat irritated the Prince exclaimed, impatiently:

"Oh, don't let us have a lyric recitation; let us be

SERGE PANINE

brief and clear. What do you want? Explain yourself. I don't suppose that you have addressed this rebuke to me solely for the purpose of telling me that you are in love with my wife!"

Pierre disregarded what was insulting in the Prince's answer, and calming himself, by force of will, replied:

"I desire, since you ask me, that you forget the folly and error of a moment, and that you swear to me on your honor never to see Madame Cayrol again."

Pierre's moderation wounded the Prince more than his rage had affected him. He felt petty beside this devoted friend, who only thought of the happiness of her whom he loved without hope. His temper increased.

"And what if I refuse to lend myself to those whims which you express so candidly?"

"Then," said Pierre, resolutely, "I shall remember that, when renouncing Micheline, I promised to be a brother to her, and if you compel me I will defend her."

"You are threatening me, I think," cried Serge, beside himself.

"No! I warn you."

"Enough," said the Prince, scarcely able to command himself. "For any little service you have rendered me, from henceforth we are quits. Don't think that I am one of those who yield to violence. Keep out of my path; it will be prudent."

"Listen, then, to this. I am not one of those who shirk a duty, whatever the peril be in accomplishing it. You know what price I put on Micheline's happiness; you are responsible for it, and I shall oblige you to respect it."

GEORGES OHNET

And leaving Serge dumb with suppressed rage, Pierre went out on the terrace.

On the high road the sound of the carriages bearing away Savinien, Herzog and his daughter, resounded in the calm starry night. In the villa everything was quiet. Pierre breathed with delight; he instinctively turned his eyes toward the brilliant sky, and in the far-off firmament, the star which he appropriated to himself long ago, and which he had so desperately looked for when he was unhappy, suddenly appeared bright and twinkling. He sighed and moved on.

The Prince spent a part of the night at the club; he was excessively nervous, and after alternate losses and gains, he retired, carrying off a goodly sum from his opponents. It was a long time since he had been so lucky, and on his way home he smiled when he thought how false was the proverb, "Lucky at play, unlucky in love." He thought of that adorable Jeanne whom he had held in his arms a few hours before, and who had so eagerly clung to him. He understood that she had never ceased to belong to him. The image of Cayrol, self-confident man, happy in his love, coming to his mind, caused Serge to laugh.

There was no thought for Micheline; she had been the stepping-stone to fortune for him; he knew that she was gentle and thought her not very discerning. He could easily deceive her; with a few caresses and a little consideration he could maintain the illusion of his love for her. Madame Desvarennes alone inconvenienced him in his arrangements. She was sagacious, and on several occasions he had seen her unveil plots

SERGE PANINE

which he thought were well contrived. He must really beware of her. He had often noticed in her voice and look an alarming hardness. She was not a woman to be afraid of a scandal. On the contrary, she would hail it with joy, and be happy to get rid of him whom she hated with all her might.

In spite of himself, Serge remembered the night of his union to Micheline, when he had said to Madame Desvarennes: "Take my life; it is yours!" She had replied seriously, and almost threateningly: "Very well; I accept it!" These words now resounded in his ears like a verdict. He promised himself to play a sure game with Madame Desvarennes. As to Cayrol, he was out of the question; he had only been created as a plaything for princes such as Serge; his destiny was written on his forehead, and he could not escape. If it had not been Panine, some one else would have done the same thing for him. Besides, how could that ex-cowherd expect to keep such a woman as Jeanne was to himself. It would have been manifestly unfair.

The Prince found his valet asleep in the hall. He went quickly to his bedroom, and slept soundly without remorse, without dreams, until noon. Coming down to breakfast, he found the family assembled. Savinien had come to see his aunt, before whom he wanted to place a "colossal idea." This time, he said, it was worth a fortune. He hoped to draw six thousand francs from the mistress who, according to her usual custom, could not fail to buy from him what he called his idea.

The dandy was thoughtful; he was preparing his

GEORGES OHNET

batteries. Micheline, pale, and her eyes red for want of rest, was seated near the gallery, silently watching the sea, on which were passing, in the distance, fishing-smacks with their sails looking like white-winged birds. Madame Desvarennes was serious, and was giving Maréchal instructions respecting her correspondence, while at the same time watching her daughter out of the corner of her eye. Micheline's depressed manner caused her some anxiety; she guessed some mystery. Still the young wife's trouble might be the result of last evening's serious interview. But the sagacity of the mistress guessed a new incident. Perhaps some scene between Serge and Micheline in regard to the club. She was on the watch.

Cayrol and Jeanne had gone for a drive to Mentone. With a single glance the Prince took in the attitude of one and all, and after a polite exchange of words and a careless kiss on Micheline's brow, he seated himself at table. The repast was silent. Each one seemed preoccupied. Serge anxiously asked himself whether Pierre had spoken. Maréchal, deeply interested in his plate, answered briefly, when addressed by Madame Desvarennes. All the guests seemed constrained. It was a relief when they rose from the table.

Micheline took her husband's arm and leading him into the garden, under the shade of the magnolias, said to him:

"My mother leaves us to-night. She has received a letter recalling her to Paris. Her journey here was, you no doubt know, on our account. Our absence made her sad, and she could no longer refrain from seeing me, so

SERGE PANINE

she came. On her return to Paris she will feel very lonely, and as I am so often alone——”

“Micheline!” interrupted Serge, with astonishment.

“It is not a reproach, dear,” continued the young wife, sweetly. “You have your engagements. There are necessities to which one must submit; you do what you think is expected of you, and it must be right. Only grant me a favor.”

“A favor? To you?” replied Serge, troubled at the unexpected turn the interview was taking. “Speak, dear one; are you not at liberty to do as you like?”

“Well,” said Micheline, with a faint smile, “as you are so kindly disposed, promise that we shall leave for Paris this week. The season is far advancing. All your friends will have returned. It will not be such a great sacrifice which I ask from you.”

“Willingly,” said Serge, surprised at Micheline’s sudden resolution. “But, admit,” added he, gravely, “that your mother has worried you a little on the subject.”

“My mother knows nothing of my project,” returned the Princess, coldly. “I did not care to say anything about it to her until I had your consent. A refusal on your part would have seemed too cruel. Already, you are not the best of friends, and it is one of my regrets. You must be good to my mother, Serge; she is getting old, and we owe her much gratitude and love.”

Panine remained silent. Could such a sudden change have come over Micheline in one day? She who lately sacrificed her mother for her husband now came and pleaded in favor of Madame Desvarennes. What had happened?

GEORGES OHNET

He promptly decided on his course of action.

"All that you ask me shall be religiously fulfilled. No concession will be too difficult for me to make if it please you. You wish to return to Paris, we will go as soon as our arrangements have been made. Tell Madame Desvarennnes, then, and let her see in our going a proof that I wish to live on good terms with her."

Micheline simply said: "Thank you." And Serge having gallantly kissed her hand, she regained the terrace.

Left alone, Serge asked himself the meaning of the transformation in his wife. For the first time she had shown signs of taking the initiative. Had the question of money been raised by Madame Desvarennnes, and was Micheline taking him back to Paris in the hope of inducing a change in his habits? They would see. The idea that Micheline had seen him with Jeanne never occurred to him. He did not think his wife capable of so much self-control. Loving as she was, she could not have controlled her feelings, and would have made a disturbance. Therefore he had no suspicions.

As to their leaving for Paris he was delighted at the idea. Jeanne and Cayrol were leaving Nice at the end of the week. Lost in the vastness of the capital, the lovers would be more secure. They could see each other at leisure. Serge would hire a small house in the neighborhood of the Bois de Boulogne, and there they could enjoy each other's society without observation.

CHAPTER XVII

CAYROL IS BLIND



MICHELINE, on her return to Paris, was a cause of anxiety to all her friends. Morally and physically she was changed. Her former gayety had disappeared. In a few weeks she became thin and seemed to be wasting away. Madame Desvarennes, deeply troubled, questioned her daughter, who answered, evasively, that she was perfectly well and had nothing to trouble her. The mother called in Doctor Rigaud, although she did not believe in the profession, and, after a long conference, took him to see Micheline. The doctor examined her, and declared it was nothing but debility. Madame Desvarennes was assailed with gloomy forebodings. She spent sleepless nights, during which she thought her daughter was dead; she heard the funeral dirges around her coffin. This strong woman wept, not daring to show her anxiety, and trembling lest Micheline should suspect her fears.

Serge was careless and happy, treating the apprehensions of those surrounding him with perfect indifference. He did not think his wife was ill—a little tired perhaps, or it might be change of climate, nothing serious. He had quite fallen into his old ways, spend-

GEORGES OHNET

ing every night at the club, and a part of the day in a little house in the Avenue Maillot, near the Bois de Boulogne. He had found one charmingly furnished, and there he sheltered his guilty happiness.

It was here that Jeanne came, thickly veiled, since her return from Nice. They each had a latchkey belonging to the door opening upon the Bois. The one who arrived first waited for the other, within the house, whose shutters remained closed to deceive passers-by. Then the hour of departure came; the hope of meeting again did not lessen their sadness at parting.

Jeanne seldom went to the Rue Saint-Dominique. The welcome that Micheline gave her was the same as usual, but Jeanne thought she discovered a coldness which made her feel uncomfortable; and she did not care to meet her lover's wife, so she made her visits scarce.

Cayrol came every morning to talk on business matters with Madame Desvarennes. He had resumed the direction of his banking establishment. The great scheme of the European Credit Company had been launched by Herzog, and promised great results. Still Herzog caused Cayrol considerable anxiety. Although a man of remarkable intelligence, he had a great failing, and by trying to grasp too much often ended by accomplishing nothing. Scarcely was one scheme launched when another idea occurred to him, to which he sacrificed the former.

Thus, Herzog was projecting a still grander scheme to be based on the European Credit. Cayrol, less sanguine, and more practical, was afraid of the new scheme, and when Herzog spoke to him about it, said that things

SERGE PANINE

were well enough for him as they were, and that he would not be implicated in any fresh financial venture however promising.

Cayrol's refusal had vexed Herzog. The German knew what opinion he was held in by the public, and that without the prestige of Cayrol's name, and behind that, the house of Desvarennes, he would never have been able to float the European Credit as it had been. He was too cunning not to know this, and Cayrol having declined to join him, he looked round in search of a suitable person to inspire the shareholders with confidence.

His daughter often went to the Rue Saint-Dominique. Madame Desvarennes and Micheline had taken a fancy to her, as she was serious, natural, and home-like. They liked to see her, although her father was not congenial to their taste. Herzog had not succeeded in making friends with the mistress; she disliked and instinctively mistrusted him.

One day it was rumored that Suzanne Herzog had gone in for an examination at the Hôtel de Ville, and had gained a certificate. People thought it was very ridiculous. What was the good of so much learning for a girl who would have such a large fortune, and who would never know want. Savinien thought it was affectation and most laughable! Madame Desvarennes thought it was most interesting; she liked workers, and considered that the richer people were, the more reason they had to work. Herzog had allowed his daughter to please herself and said nothing.

Springtime had come, and fine weather, yet Michel-

GEORGES OHNET

ine's health did not improve. She did not suffer, but a sort of languor had come over her. For days she never quitted her reclining-chair. She was very affectionate toward her mother, and seemed to be making up for the lack of affection shown during the first months of her marriage.

She never questioned Serge as to his manner of spending his time, though she seldom saw him, except at meal hours. Every week she wrote to Pierre, who was buried in his mines, and after every despatch her mother noticed that she seemed sadder and paler.

Serge and Jeanne grew bolder. They felt that they were not watched. The little house seemed too small for them, and they longed to go beyond the garden, as the air of the Bois was so sweet and scented with violets. A feeling of bravado came over them, and they did not mind being seen together. People would think they were a newly-married couple.

One afternoon they sallied forth, Jeanne wearing a thick veil, and trembling at the risk she was running, yet secretly delighted at going. They chose the most unfrequented paths and solitary nooks. Then, after an hour's stroll, they returned briskly, frightened at the sounds of carriages rolling in the distance. They often went out after that, and chose in preference the paths near the pond of Madrid where, behind sheltering shrubs, they sat talking and listening to the busy hum of Parisian life, seemingly so far away.

One day, about four o'clock, Madame Desvarennes was going to Saint-Cloud on business, and was crossing the Bois de Boulogne. Her coachman had chosen the

SERGE PANINE

most unfrequented paths to save time. She had opened the carriage-window, and was enjoying the lovely scent from the shrubs. Suddenly a watering-cart stopped the way. Madame Desvarennes looked through the window to see what was the matter, and remained stupefied. At the turning of a path she espied Serge, with a woman on his arm. She uttered a cry that caused the couple to turn round. Seeing that pale face, they sought to hide themselves.

In a moment Madame Desvarennes was out of the carriage. The guilty couple fled down a path. Without caring what might be said of her, and goaded on by a fearful rage, she tried to follow them. She especially wished to see the woman who was closely veiled. She guessed her to be Jeanne. But the younger woman, terrified, fled like a deer down a side walk. Madame Desvarennes, quite out of breath, was obliged to stop. She heard the slamming of a carriage-door, and a hired brougham that had been waiting at the end of the path swept by her bearing the lovers toward the town.

The mistress hesitated a moment, then said to her coachman:

“Drive home.” And, abandoning her business, she arrived in the Rue Saint-Dominique a few minutes after the Prince.

With a bound, without going through the offices, without even taking off her bonnet and cloak, she went up to Serge’s apartments. Without hesitating, she entered the smoking-room.

Panine was there. Evidently he was expecting her. On seeing Madame Desvarennes he rose, with a smile:

GEORGES OHNET

"One can see that you are at home," said he, ironically; "you come in without knocking."

"No nonsense; the moment is ill-chosen," briefly retorted the mistress. "Why did you run away when you saw me a little while ago?"

"You have such a singular way of accosting people," he answered, lightly. "You come on like a charge of cavalry. The person with whom I was talking was frightened, she ran away and I followed her."

"She was doing wrong then if she was frightened. Does she know me?"

"Who does not know you? You are almost notorious—in the corn-market!"

Madame Desvarennnes allowed the insult to pass without remark, and advancing toward Serge, said:

"Who is this woman?"

"Shall I introduce her to you?" inquired the Prince, quietly. "She is one of my countrywomen, a Polish—"'

"You are a liar!" cried Madame Desvarennnes, unable to control her temper any longer. "You are lying most impudently!"

And she was going to add, "That woman was Jeanne!" but prudence checked the sentence on her lips.

Serge turned pale.

"You forget yourself strangely, Madame," he said, in a dry tone.

"I forgot myself a year ago, not now! It was when I was weak that I forgot myself. When Micheline was between you and me I neither dared to speak nor act.

SERGE PANINE

But now, since after almost ruining my poor daughter, you deceive her, I have no longer any consideration for you. To make her come over to my side I have only to speak one word."

"Well, speak it! She is there. I will call her!"

Madame Desvarennes, in that supreme moment, was assailed by a doubt. What if Micheline, in her blind love, did not believe her?

She raised her hand to stop Serge.

"Will not the fear of killing my daughter by this revelation stay you?" asked she, bitterly. "What manner of man are you to have so little heart and conscience?"

Panine burst into laughter.

"You see what your threats are worth, and what value I place on them. Spare them in the future. You ask me what manner of man I am? I will tell you. I have not much patience, I hate to have my liberty interfered with, and I have a horror of family jars. I expect to be master of my own house."

Madame Desvarennes was roused at these words. Her rage had abated on her daughter's account, but now it rose to a higher pitch.

"Ah! so this is it, is it?" she said. "You would like perfect liberty, I see! You make such very good use of it. You don't like to hear remarks upon it. It is more convenient, in fact! You wish to be master in your own house? In *your* own house! But, in truth, what are you here to put on airs toward me? Scarcely more than a servant. A husband receiving wages from me!"

Serge, with flashing eyes, made a terrible movement. He tried to speak, but his lips trembled, and he could

GEORGES OHNET

not utter a sound. By a sign he showed Madame Desvarennes the door. The latter looked resolutely at the Prince, and with energy which nothing could henceforth soften, added:

"You will have to deal with me in future! Good-day!"

And, leaving the room with as much calmness as she felt rage when entering it, she went down to the counting-house.

Cayrol was sitting chatting with Maréchal in his room. He was telling him that Herzog's rashness caused him much anxiety. Maréchal did not encourage his confidence. The secretary's opinion on the want of morality on the part of the financier had strengthened. The good feeling he entertained toward the daughter had not counterbalanced the bad impression he had of the father, and he warmly advised Cayrol to break off all financial connection with such a man. Cayrol, indeed, had now very little to do with the European Credit. The office was still at his banking-house, and the payments for shares were still made into his bank, but as soon as the new scheme which Herzog was preparing was launched, the financier intended settling in splendid offices which were being rapidly completed in the neighborhood of the Opera. Herzog might therefore commit all the follies which entered his head. Cayrol would be out of it.

Madame Desvarennes entered. At the first glance, the men noticed the traces of the emotion she had just experienced. They rose and waited in silence. When the mistress was in a bad humor everybody gave way

SERGE PANINE

to her. It was the custom. She nodded to Cayrol, and walked up and down the office, absorbed in her own thoughts. Suddenly stopping, she said:

"Maréchal, prepare Prince Panine's account."

The secretary looked up amazed, and did not seem to understand.

"Well! The Prince has had an overdraft; you will give me a statement; that's all! I wish to see how we two stand."

The two men, astonished to hear Madame Desvarennes speak of her son-in-law as she would of a customer, exchanged looks.

"You have lent my son-in-law money, Cayrol?"

And as the banker remained silent, still looking at the secretary, Madame added:

"Does the presence of Maréchal make you hesitate in answering me? Speak before him; I have told you more than a hundred times that he knows my business as well as I do."

"I have, indeed, advanced some money to the Prince," replied Cayrol.

"How much?" inquired Madame Desvarennes.

"I don't remember the exact amount. I was happy to oblige your son-in-law."

"You were wrong, and have acted unwisely in not acquainting me of the fact. It is thus that his follies have been encouraged by obliging friends. At all events, I ask you now not to lend him any more."

Cayrol seemed put out, and, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up, replied:

"This is a delicate matter which you ask of me.

GEORGES OHNET

You will cause a quarrel between the Prince and myself."

"Do you prefer quarrelling with me?" asked the mistress.

"Zounds! No!" replied the banker. "But you place me in an embarrassing position! I have just promised to lend Serge a considerable sum to-night."

"Well! you will not give it to him."

"That is an act which he will scarcely forgive," sighed Cayrol.

Madame Desvarennes placed her hand on the shoulder of the banker, and looking seriously at him, said:

"You would not have forgiven me if I had allowed you to render him this service."

A vague uneasiness filled Cayrol's heart, a shadow seemed to pass before his eyes, and in a troubled voice he said to the mistress:

"Why so?"

"Because he would have repaid you badly."

Cayrol thought the mistress was alluding to the money he had already lent, and his fears vanished. Madame Desvarennes would surely repay it.

"So you are cutting off his resources?" he asked.

"Completely," answered the mistress. "He takes too much liberty, that young gentleman. He was wrong to forget that I hold the purse-strings. I don't mind paying, but I want a little deference shown me for my money. Good-by! Cayrol, remember my instructions."

And, shaking hands with the banker, Madame Des-

SERGE PANINE

varennes entered her own office, leaving the two men together.

There was a moment's pause: Cayrol was the first to break the silence.

"What do you think of the Prince's position?"

"His financial position?" asked Maréchal.

"Oh, no! I know all about that! I mean his relation to Madame Desvarennnes."

"Zounds! If we were in Venice in the days of the Aqua-Toffana, the sbirri and the bravi——"

"What rubbish!" interrupted Cayrol, shrugging his shoulders.

"Let me continue," said the secretary, "and you can shrug your shoulders afterward if you like. If we had been in Venice, knowing Madame Desvarennnes as I do, it would not have been surprising to me to have had Master Serge found at the bottom of the canal some fine morning."

"You are not in earnest," muttered the banker.

"Much more so than you think. Only you know we live in the nineteenth century, and we cannot make Providence interpose in the form of a dagger or poison so easily as in former days. Arsenic and verdigris are sometimes used, but it does not answer. Scientific people have had the meanness to invent tests by which poison can be detected even when there is none."

"You are making fun of me," said Cayrol, laughing.

"I! No. Come, do you wish to do a good stroke of business? Find a man who will consent to rid Madame Desvarennnes of her son-in-law. If he succeed, ask Madame Desvarennnes for a million francs. I will

GEORGES OHNET

pay it at only twenty-five francs', discount, if you like!"

Cayrol was thoughtful. Maréchal continued:

"You have known the house a long time, how is it you don't understand the mistress better? I tell you, and remember this: between Madame Desvarennnes and the Prince there is a mortal hatred. One of the two will destroy the other. Which? Betting is open."

"But what must I do? The Prince relies on me"

"Go and tell him not to do so any longer."

"Faith, no! I would rather he came to my office. I should be more at ease. Adieu, Maréchal."

"Adieu, Monsieur Cayrol. But on whom will you bet?"

"Before I venture I should like to know on whose side the Princess is."

"Ah, dangler! You think too much of the women! Some day you will be let in through that failing of yours!"

Cayrol smiled conceitedly, and went away. Maréchal sat down at his desk, and took out a sheet of paper.

"I must tell Pierre that everything is going on well here," he murmured. "If he knew what was taking place he would soon be back, and might be guilty of some foolery or other." So he commenced writing.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNIVERSAL CREDIT COMPANY



HE banking-house of Cayrol had not a very imposing appearance. It was a narrow two-storied building, the front blackened by time. There was a carriage gateway, on the right-hand side of which was the entrance to the offices. The stairs leading to the first floor were covered by a well-worn carpet. Here was a long corridor into which the different offices opened. On their glass doors might be read: "Payments of dividends." "Accounts." "Foreign correspondence." "General office." Cayrol's own room was quite at the end, and communicated with his private apartments. Everything breathed of simplicity and honesty. Cayrol had never tried to throw dust into people's eyes. He had started modestly when opening the bank; his business had increased, but his habits had remained the same. It was not a difficult matter to obtain an interview, even by people not known to him. They sent in their cards, and were admitted to his sanctum.

It was amid the coming and going of customers and clerks that Prince Panine came the following day to find Cayrol. For the first time Serge had put himself out

GEORGES OHNET

for the banker. He was introduced with marks of the most profound respect. The great name of Desvarennnes seemed to cast a kind of halo round his head in the eyes of the clerks.

Cayrol, a little embarrassed, but still resolute, went toward him. Serge seemed nervous and somewhat abrupt in manner. He foresaw some difficulty.

"Well! my dear fellow," he said, without sitting down. "What are you up to? I have waited since yesterday for the money you promised me."

Cayrol scratched his ear, and felt taken aback by this plain speaking.

"The fact is—" stammered he.

"Have you forgotten your engagement?" asked Serge, frowning.

"No," replied Cayrol, speaking slowly, "but I met Madame Desvarennnes yesterday."

"And what had that to do with your intentions?"

"Zounds! It had everything to do with them. Your mother-in-law made a scene, and forbade my lending you any money. You must understand, my dear Prince, that my relations with Madame Desvarennnes are important. I hold a great deal of money of hers in my bank. She first gave me a start. I cannot, without appearing ungrateful, act contrary to her will. Place yourself in my position, and judge impartially of the terrible alternative between obliging you and displeasing my benefactress."

"Don't cry; it is useless," said Serge, with a scornful laugh. "I sympathize with your troubles. You side

SERGE PANINE

with the money-bags. It remains to be seen whether you will gain by it."

"My dear Prince, I swear to you that I am in despair," cried Cayrol, annoyed at the turn the interview was taking. "Listen; be reasonable! I don't know what you have done to your mother-in-law, but she seems much vexed with you. In your place I would rather make a few advances than remain hostile toward Madame Desvarennnes. That would mend matters, you see. Flies are not to be caught with vinegar."

Serge looked contemptuously at Cayrol, and put on his hat with supreme insolence.

"Pardon me, my dear fellow; as a banker you are excellent when you have any money to spare, but as a moralist you are highly ridiculous."

And, turning on his heel, he quitted the office, leaving Cayrol quite abashed. He passed along the corridor switching his cane with suppressed rage. Madame Desvarennnes had, with one word, dried up the source from which he had been drawing most of the money which he had spent during the last three months. He had to pay a large sum that evening at the club, and he did not care to apply to the money-lenders of Paris.

He went down the stairs wondering how he would get out of this scrape! Go to Madame Desvarennnes and humble himself as Cayrol advised? Never! He regretted, for a moment, the follies which had led him into this difficulty. He ought to have been able to live on two hundred thousand francs a year! He had squandered money foolishly, and now the inexhaustible well

GEORGES OHNET

from which he had drawn his treasure was closed by an invincible will.

He was crossing the gateway, when a well-known voice struck his ear, and he turned round. Herzog, smiling in his enigmatical manner, was before him. Serge bowed, and wanted to pass on, but the financier put his hand on his arm, saying:

"What a hurry you are in, Prince. I suppose your pocketbook is full of notes, and you are afraid of being plundered."

And with his finger, Herzog touched the silver mounted pocketbook, the corner of which was peeping out of the Prince's pocket. Panine could not control a gesture of vexation, which made the financier smile.

"Am I wrong?" asked Herzog. "Can our friend Cayrol have refused your request? By-the-bye, did you not quarrel with Madame Desvarennes yesterday? Whoever was it told me that? Your mother-in-law spoke of cutting off all your credit, and from your downcast look I guess that fool Cayrol has obeyed the orders he has received."

Serge, exasperated and stamping with rage, wanted to speak, but it was no easy matter interrupting Herzog. Besides, there was something in the latter's look which annoyed Serge. His glance seemed to be fathoming the depths of Panine's pockets, and the latter instinctively tightened his arms across his chest, so that Herzog might not see that his pocketbook was empty.

"What are you talking about?" asked Serge, at last, with a constrained smile.

"About things which must greatly interest you," said

SERGE PANINE

Herzog, familiarly. "Come, be sincere. Cayrol has just refused you a sum of money. He's a simpleton! How much do you want? Will a hundred thousand francs do just now?"

And writing a few words on a check, the financier handed it to Serge, adding:

"A man of your position should not be in any difficulty for such a paltry sum!"

"But, sir," said Serge, astonished, and pushing away Herzog's hand.

"Accept it, and don't feel indebted to me. It is hardly worth while between you and me."

And taking Panine's arm Herzog walked on with him.

"Your carriage is there? all right, mine will follow. I want to talk to you. Your troubles cannot last. I will show you the means of extricating yourself and that without delay, my dear sir."

And without consulting Panine he seated himself beside him in the carriage.

"I told you once, if you remember," continued the financier, "that I might prove useful to you. You were haughty, and I did not insist; yet you see the day has come. Let me speak frankly with you. It is my usual manner, and there is some good in it."

"Speak," answered Serge, rather puzzled.

"You find yourself at this moment, vulgarly speaking, left in the lurch. Your wants are many and your resources few."

"At least—" protested Serge.

"Good! There you are refractory," said the financier, laughingly, "and I have not finished. The day

GEORGES OHNET

after your marriage you formed your household on a lavish footing; you gave splendid receptions; you bought race-horses; in short, you went the pace like a great lord. Undoubtedly it costs a lot of money to keep up such an establishment. As you spent without counting the cost, you confounded the capital with the interest, so that at this moment you are three parts ruined. I don't think you would care to change your mode of living, and it is too late in the day to cut down expenses and exist on what remains? No. Well, to keep up your present style you need at least a million francs every year."

"You calculate like Cocker," remarked Serge, smiling with some constraint.

"That is my business," answered Herzog. "There are two ways by which you can obtain that million. The first is by making it up with your mother-in-law, and consenting, for money, to live under her dominion. I know her, she will agree to this."

"But," said Serge, "I refuse to submit."

"In that case you must get out of your difficulties alone."

"And how?" inquired the Prince, with astonishment.

Herzog looked at him seriously.

"By entering on the path which I am ready to open up to you," replied Herzog, "and in which I will guide you. By going in for business."

Serge returned Herzog's glance and tried to read his face, but found him impenetrable.

"To go into business one needs experience, and I have none."

SERGE PANINE

"Mine will suffice," retorted the financier.

"Or money," continued the Prince, "and I have none, either."

"I don't ask money from you. I offer you some."

"What, then, do I bring into the concern?"

"The prestige of your name, and your relations with Madame Desvarennes."

The Prince answered, haughtily:

"My relations are personal, and I doubt whether they will serve you. My mother-in-law is hostile, and will do nothing for me. As to my name, it does not belong to me, it belongs to those who bore it nobly before me."

"Your relations will serve me," said Herzog. "I am satisfied. Your mother-in-law cannot get out of your being her daughter's husband, and for that you are worth your weight in gold. As to your name, it is just because it has been nobly borne that it is valuable. Thank your ancestors, therefore, and make the best of the only heritage they left you. Besides, if you care to examine things closely, your ancestors will not have reason to tremble in their graves. What did they do formerly? They imposed taxes on their vassals and extorted money from the vanquished. We financiers do the same. Our vanquished are the speculators; our vassals the shareholders. And what a superiority there is about our proceedings! There is no violence. We persuade; we fascinate; and the money flows into our coffers. What do I say? They beseech us to take it. We reign without contest. We are princes, too—princes of finance. We have founded an aristocracy as

GEORGES OHNET

proud and as powerful as the old one. Feudality of nobility no longer exists; it has given way to that of money."

Serge laughed. He saw what Herzog was driving at.

"Your great barons of finance are sometimes subject to executions," said he.

"Were not Chalais, Cinq-Mars, Biron, and Montmorency executed?" asked Herzog, with irony.

"That was on a scaffold," replied Panine.

"Well! the speculator's scaffold is the Bourse! But only small dabblers in money succumb; the great ones are safe from danger. They are supported in their undertakings by such powerful and numerous interests that they cannot fail without involving public credit; even governments are forced to come to their aid. One of these powerful and indestructible enterprises I have dreamed of grafting on to the European Credit Company, the Universal Credit Company. Its very name is a programme in itself. To stretch over the four quarters of the globe like an immense net, and draw into its meshes all financial speculators: such is its aim. Nobody will be able to withstand us. I am offering you great things, but I dream of still greater. I have ideas. You will see them developed, and will profit by them, if you join my fortunes. You are ambitious, Prince. I guessed it; but your ambition hitherto has been satisfied with small things—luxurious indulgences and triumphs of elegance! What are these worth to what I can give you? The sphere in which you move is narrow. I will make it immense. You will no longer reign over a small social circle, you will rule a world."

SERGE PANINE

Serge, more affected than he cared to show, tried to banter.

"Are you repeating the prologue to Faust?" asked he. "Where is your magical compact? Must I sign it?"

"Not at all. Your consent is sufficient. Look into the business, study it at your leisure, and measure the results; and then if it suit you, you can sign a deed of partnership. Then in a few years you may possess a fortune surpassing all that you have dreamed of."

The financier remained silent. Serge was weighing the question. Herzog was happy; he had shown himself to all Paris in company with Madame Desvarennes's son-in-law. He had already realized one of his projects. The carriage was just passing down the Champs-Elysées. The weather was lovely, and in the distance could be seen the trees of the Tuilleries and the different monuments of the Place de la Concorde bathed in blue mist. Groups of horsemen were cantering along the side avenues. Long files of carriages were rolling rapidly by with well-dressed ladies. The capital displayed at that hour all the splendor of its luxury. It was Paris in all its strength and gayety.

Herzog stretched out his hand, and calling the Prince's attention to the sight, said:

"There's your empire!"

Then, looking at him earnestly, he asked:

"Is it agreed?"

Serge hesitated for a moment, and then bowed his head, saying:

"It is agreed."

GEORGES OHNET

Herzog pulled the check-string communicating with the coachman and alighted.

"Good-by," said he to Panine.

He slipped into his own carriage, which had followed closely behind, and drove off.

From that day, even Jeanne had a rival. The fever of speculation had seized on Serge; he had placed his little finger within the wheels and he must follow—body, name, and soul. The power which this new game exercised over him was incredible. It was quite different to the stupid games at the club, always the same. On the Bourse, everything was new, unexpected, sudden, and formidable. The intensity of the feelings were increased a hundredfold, owing to the importance of the sums risked.

It was really a splendid sight to see Herzog manipulating matters, manœuvring with a miraculous dexterity millions of francs. And then the field for operations was large. Politics, the interests of nations, were the mainsprings which impelled the play, and the game assumed diplomatic vastness and financial grandeur.

From his private office Herzog issued orders, and whether his ability was really extraordinary, or whether fortune exceptionally favored him, success was certain. Serge, from the first week, realized considerable sums. This brilliant success threw him in a state of great excitement. He believed everything that Herzog said to him as if it were gospel. He saw the world bending under the yoke which he was about to impose upon it. People working and toiling every day were doing so for him alone, and like one of those kings who had con-

SERGE PANINE

quered the world, he pictured all the treasures of the earth laid at his feet. From that time he lost the sense of right and wrong. He admitted the unlikely, and found the impossible quite natural. He was a docile tool in the hands of Herzog.

The rumor of this unforeseen change in Panine's circumstances soon reached Madame Desvarennes's ears. The mistress was frightened, and sent for Cayrol, begging him to remain a director of the European Credit, in order to watch the progress of the new affair. With her practical common sense, she foresaw disasters, and even regretted that Serge had not confined himself to cards and reckless living.

Cayrol was most uneasy, and made a confidant of his wife, who, deeply troubled, told Panine the fears his friends entertained on his account. The Prince smiled disdainfully, saying these fears were the effect of plebeian timidity. The mistress understood nothing of great speculations, and Cayrol was a narrow-minded banker! He knew what he was doing. The results of his speculations were mathematical. So far they had not disappointed his hopes. The great Universal Credit Company, of which he was going to be a director, would bring him in such an immense fortune that he would be independent of Madame Desvarennes.

Jeanne, terrified at this blind confidence, tried to persuade him. Serge took her in his arms, kissed her, and banished her fears.

Madame Desvarennes had forbidden her people to tell Micheline anything of what was going on, as she wished her to remain in perfect ignorance. By a word,

GEORGES OHNET

the mistress, if she could not have prevented the follies of which Serge was guilty, could, at least, have spared herself and her daughter. It would have only been necessary to reveal his behavior and betrayal to Micheline, and to provoke a separation. If the house of Desvarennes were no longer security for Panine, his credit would fall. Disowned by his mother-in-law, and publicly given up by her, he would be of no use to Herzog, and would be promptly thrown over by him. The mistress did not wish her daughter to know the heartrending truth. She would not willingly cause her to shed tears, and therefore preferred risking ruin.

Micheline, too, tried to hide her troubles from her mother. She knew too well that Serge would have the worst of it if he got into her black books. With the incredible persistence of a loving heart, she hoped to win back Serge. Thus a terrible misunderstanding caused these two women to remain inactive and silent, when, by united efforts, they might, perhaps, have prevented dangers.

The great speculation was already being talked about. Herzog was boldly placing his foot on the summit whereon the five or six demigods, who ruled the stock market, were firmly placed. The audacious encroachments of this newcomer had vexed these formidable potentates, and already they had decided secretly his downfall, because he would not let them share in his profits.

One morning, the Parisians, on awakening, found the walls placarded with notices advertising the issue of shares in the Universal Credit Company, and announc-

SERGE PANINE

ing the names of the directors, among which appeared that of the Prince. Some were members of the Légion d'Honneur; others recent members of the Cabinet Council, and Préfets retired into private life. A list of names to dazzle the public, but all having a weak point.

This created a great sensation in the business world. Madame Desvarennes's son-in-law was on the board. It was a good speculation, then? People consulted the mistress, who found herself somewhat in a dilemma; either she must disown her son-in-law, or speak well of the affair. Still she did not hesitate, for she was loyal and honest above all things. She declared the speculation was a poor one, and did all she could to prevent any of her friends becoming shareholders.

The issue of shares was disastrous. The great banks remained hostile, and capitalists were mistrustful. Herzog landed a few million francs. Doorkeepers and cooks brought him their savings. He covered expenses. But it was no use advertising and puffing in the newspapers, as a word had gone forth which paralyzed the speculation. Ugly rumors were afloat. Herzog's German origin was made use of by the bankers, who whispered that the aim of the Universal Credit Company was exclusively political. It was to establish branch banks in every part of the world to further the interests of German industry. Further, at a given moment, Germany might have need of a loan in case of war, and the Universal Credit Company would be there to supply the necessary aid to the great military nation.

Herzog was not a man to be put down without resisting, and he made supreme efforts to float his under-

GEORGES OHNET

taking. He caused a number of unissued shares to be sold on 'Change, and had them bought up by his own men, thus creating a fictitious interest in the company. In a few days the shares rose and were at a premium, simply through the jobbery to which Herzog lent himself.

Panine was little disposed to seek for explanations, and, besides, had such unbounded faith in his partner that he suspected nothing. He remained in perfect tranquillity. He had increased his expenditure, and his household was on a royal footing. Micheline's sweetness emboldened him; he no longer took the trouble of dissimulating, and treated his young wife with perfect indifference.

Jeanne and Serge met every day at the little house in the Avenue Maillot. Cayrol was too much engaged with the new anxieties which Herzog caused him, to look after his wife, and left her quite free to amuse herself. Besides, he had not the least suspicion. Jeanne, like all guilty women, overwhelmed him with kind attentions, which the good man mistook for proofs of love. The fatal passion was growing daily stronger in the young woman's heart, and she would have found it impossible to have given up her dishonorable happiness with Panine. She felt herself capable of doing anything to preserve her lover.

Jeanne had already said, "Oh! if we were but free!" And they formed projects. They would go away to Lake Lugano, and, in a villa hidden by trees and shrubs, would enjoy the pleasures of being indissolubly united. The woman was more eager than the man in

SERGE PANINE

giving way to these visions of happiness. She sometimes said, "What hinders us now? Let us go." But Serge, prudent and discreet, even in the most affectionate moments, led Jeanne to take a more sensible view. What was the use of a scandal? Did they not belong to each other?

Then the young woman reproached him for not loving her as much as she loved him. She was tired of dissimulating; her husband was an object of horror to her, and she had to tell him untruths and submit to his caresses which were revolting to her. Serge calmed her with a kiss, and bade her wait awhile.

Pierre, rendered anxious on hearing that Serge had joined Herzog in his dangerous financial speculations, had left his mines and had just arrived. The letters which Micheline addressed to the friend of her youth, her enforced confidant in trouble, were calm and resigned. Full of pride, she had carefully hidden from Pierre the cause of her troubles. He was the last person by whom she would like to be pitied, and her letters had represented Serge as repentant and full of good feeling. Maréchal, for similar reasons, had kept his friend in the dark. He feared Pierre's interference, and he wished to spare Madame Desvarenes the grief of seeing her adopted son quarrelling with her son-in-law.

But the placards announcing the establishment of the Universal Credit Company made their way into the provinces, and one morning Pierre found some stuck on the walls of his establishment. Seeing the name of Panine, and not that of Cayrol, Pierre shuddered. The unpleasant ideas which he experienced formerly when

GEORGES OHNET

Herzog was introduced to the Desvarennes recurred to his mind. He wrote to the mistress to ask what was going on, and not receiving an answer, he started off without hesitation for Paris.

He found Madame Desvarennes in a terrible state of excitement. The shares had just fallen a hundred and twenty francs. A panic had ensued. The affair was considered as absolutely lost, and the shareholders were aggravating matters by wanting to sell out at once.

Savinien was just coming away from the mistress's room. He wanted to see the downfall of the Prince, whom he had always hated, looking upon him as a usurper of his own rights upon the fortune of the Desvarennes. He began lamenting to his aunt, when she turned upon him with unusual harshness, and he felt bound as he said, laughing, to leave the "funereal mansion."

Cayrol, as much interested in the affairs of the Prince as if they were his own, went backward and forward between the Rue Saint-Dominique and the Rue Taitbout, pale and troubled, but without losing his head. He had already saved the European Credit Company by separating it six weeks before from the Universal Credit Company, notwithstanding Madame Desvarennes's supplications to keep them together, in the hope that the one would save the other. But Cayrol, practical, clear, and implacable, had refused, for the first time, to obey Madame Desvarennes. He acted with the resolution of a captain of a vessel, who throws overboard a portion of the cargo to save the ship, the crew, and the rest of the merchandise. He did well,

SERGE PANINE

and the European Credit was safe. The shares had fallen a little, but a favorable reaction was already showing itself. The name of Cayrol, and his presence at the head of affairs, had reassured the public, and the shareholders gathered round him, passing a vote of confidence.

The banker, devoted to his task, next sought to save Panine, who was at that very moment robbing him of his honor and happiness in the house of the Avenue Maillot.

Pierre, Cayrol, and Madame Desvarennes met in Maréchal's private office. Pierre declared that it was imperative to take strong measures and to speak to the Prince. It was the duty of the mistress to enlighten Panine, who was no doubt Herzog's dupe.

Madame Desvarennes shook her head sadly. She feared that Serge was not a dupe but an accomplice. And what could she tell him? Let him ruin himself! He would not believe her. She knew how he received her advice and bore her remonstrances.

An explanation between her and Serge was impossible, and her interference would only hurry him into the abyss.

"Well, then, I will speak to him," said Pierre, resolutely.

"No," said Madame Desvarennes, "not you! Only one here can tell him efficaciously what he must hear, and that is Cayrol. Let us above all things keep guard over our words and our behavior. On no account must Micheline suspect anything."

Thus, at the most solemn moments, when fortune

GEORGES OHNET

and honor, perhaps, were compromised, the mother thought of her daughter's welfare and happiness.

Cayrol went up to the Prince's rooms. He had just come in, and was opening his letters, while having a cigarette in the smoking-room. A door, covered by curtains, led to a back stair which opened into the courtyard. Cayrol had gone up that way, feeling sure that by so doing he would not meet Micheline.

On seeing Jeanne's husband, Serge rose quickly. He feared that Cayrol had discovered everything, and instinctively stepped backward. The banker's manner soon undeceived him. He was serious, but not in a rage. He had evidently come on business.

"Well, my dear Cayrol," said the Prince, gayly, "what good fortune has brought you here?"

"If it is fortune, it is certainly not good fortune," answered the banker, gravely. "I wish to have some talk with you, and I shall be grateful if you will listen patiently."

"Oh! oh!" said Serge. "How serious you are. You have some heavy payments on hand, and want a little help, eh? I will speak to Herzog."

Cayrol looked at the Prince in amazement. So he did not suspect anything? Such carelessness and negligence frightened him. The banker resolved to proceed clearly, and without beating about the bush; to do away with such blind confidence a thunderbolt was necessary.

"I have not come about my business, but yours," returned Cayrol. "The Universal Credit Company is on the eve of disaster; there is still time for you to withdraw

SERGE PANINE

safely and soundly from the sinking wreck. I bring you the means."

Serge laughed.

"Thank you, Cayrol; you are very kind, my friend. I know your intentions are good, but I don't believe a word you are saying. You have come from Madame Desvarennnes. You are both agreed that I shall give up the Universal Credit, but I will not yield to any pressure. I know what I am doing. Be easy."

And quietly lighting another cigarette, he gracefully puffed the smoke toward the ceiling. Cayrol did not trouble to argue, but took a newspaper from his pocket and handed it to Panine, simply saying, "Read!"

It was an article in a reliable financial paper prophesying the failure of the Universal Credit Company, and basing its statements on irrefutable calculations. Serge took the paper and looked over it. He turned pale and crushed it in his hand.

"What infamy!" cried he. "I know our adversaries are enraged. Yes, they know that our new company is destined to crush them in the future, and they are doing all they can to run us aground. Jealousy! Envy! There is no other foundation for these rumors, and they are unworthy a serious man's attention."

"There is neither envy nor jealousy. All is true," said Cayrol. "You will admit that I am your sincere friend? Well, I swear to you that the situation is terrible, and you must resign your directorship of the Universal Credit without loss of time. There's not a moment to lose. Sit down and write your resignation."

"Do you think I am a child to be led by the nose like

GEORGES OHNET

that?" asked the Prince, in a passion. "If you are sincere, Cayrol, as I wish to believe, I also think you are a fool. You don't understand! As to drawing out of the company, never! I have a lot of money invested in it."

"Well, lose your money, Madame Desvarennes will pay you back. At least you can save your name."

"Ah, I see you are conniving with her!" exclaimed the Prince, loudly. "Don't tell me another word, I don't believe you. I shall go straight to the office, and I will speak to Herzog. We will take measures to prosecute the papers for libel if they dare to publish these untruths."

Cayrol saw that nothing would convince Panine. He hoped that an interview with Herzog would enlighten him. He left the matter to chance, as reasoning was of no avail, and went down to the mistress.

Serge drove to the Universal Credit Company. It was the first day in the new offices. Herzog had furnished them splendidly, thinking that this would give the shareholders a high opinion of the undertaking. How could they have any doubts when they saw such splendid furniture and large offices? How could they refuse to place their money in the hands of speculators that could cover their floors with such soft carpets? The porters, with their dark blue and red cloth liveries, and buttons with the company's monogram on them, answered inquiries with haughty condescension. Everything foretold success. It was in the air. You could hear the cashier shovelling heaps of gold. The people who had placed the Universal Credit Company on such a footing were either very powerful or very impudent.

SERGE PANINE

Serge walked in, as he would have done at home, with his hat on, amid a number of small shareholders, who had come full of anxiety after reading the accounts in the newspapers, and who felt full of confidence after seeing the splendor of the place. Panine reached Herzog's office, but when about to open the door, loud voices struck his ear. The financier was arguing with a director, and Panine listened.

"The speculation is safe and sure," Herzog was saying. "The shares are low, I know, because I have ceased to keep them up. I have given orders in London, Vienna, and Berlin, and we are buying up all shares that are offered in the market. I shall then run the shares up again, and we shall realize an enormous sum. It is most simple."

"But it is shady," said the other voice.

"Why? I defend myself as I am attacked. The great banks seek to deteriorate my stock. I buy in, and take it out of my adversaries. Is it not just and lawful?"

Panine breathed freely and felt reassured. The depreciation was caused by Herzog; he had just said so. There was nothing to fear then. It was just a trick of Herzog's, and the company would come out brighter than ever.

Serge went in.

"Oh! here's Prince Panine," said Herzog. "Ask him what he thinks of the matter. I defer to his judgment."

"I don't want to know anything," said Serge. "I have full confidence in you, my dear manager, and our

GEORGES OHNET

business will prosper in your hands, I am sure. Besides, I know the manœuvres of our opponents, and I think every financial means justifiable to answer them."

"Ah! What did I say to you a few minutes ago?" cried Herzog, addressing his questioner in a tone of triumph. "Let me act and you will see. Besides, I don't want to keep you against your will," he added, harshly. "You are at liberty to withdraw from us if you like."

The other protested that what he had said was for the best interests of all concerned. He did not dream of leaving the company; on the contrary, they might rely on him. He appreciated the experience and ability of Herzog too well to separate his fortune from his friend's. And, shaking hands with the financier, he took his leave.

"Come! What is all this clamor in the newspapers?" asked Serge, when he found himself alone with Herzog. "Do you know that the articles published are very perfidious?"

"All the more perfidious because they are founded on truth," said the financier, coldly.

"What do you mean?" cried Serge, in alarm.

"The truth. Do you think I am to tell you lies as I did to that idiot who has just gone out? The Universal Credit has at this moment a screw loose. But patience! I have an idea, and in a fortnight the shares will have doubled in value. I have a splendid scheme in hand which will kill the gas companies. It is a plan for lighting by magnesium. Its effect will be startling. I shall publish sensational articles describing the invention in

SERGE PANINE

the London and Brussels papers. Gas shares will fall very low. I shall buy up all I can, and when I am master of the situation, I shall announce that the threatened gas companies are buying up the invention. Shares will rise again, and I shall realize a goodly sum, which will be for the benefit of the Universal Credit."

"But for such a formidable speculation foreign agents will require security?"

"I will offer it to them. I have here ten million francs' worth of shares in the European Credit belonging to Cayrol. We will give the cashier a joint receipt for them. The speculation will last three days. It is safe, and when the result is achieved we will replace the shares, and take back the receipt."

"But," asked Serge, "is this plan of taking the shares which don't belong to us legal?"

"It is a transfer," said Herzog, with simplicity. "Besides, don't forget that we have to do with Cayrol, that is to say with a partner."

"Suppose we tell him of it," insisted the Prince.

"No! The deuce! We should have to explain everything to him. He knows what's what, and would find the idea too good, and want a share of the spoil. No! Sign that, and don't be alarmed. The sheep will be back in the fold before the shepherd comes to count them."

A dark presentiment crossed Serge's mind, and he was afraid. At that moment, when his fate was being decided, he hesitated to go deeper into the rut where he had already been walking too long. He stood silent and undecided. Confused thoughts crowded his brain;

GEORGES OHNET

his temples throbbed, and a buzzing noise sounded in his ears. But the thought of giving up his liberty, and again subjecting himself to Madame Desvarennes's protection was like the lash of a whip, and he blushed for having hesitated.

Herzog looked at him, and, smiling in a constrained way, said:

"You, too, may give up the affair if you like. If I share it with you it is because you are so closely allied to me. I don't so very much care to cut the pear in two. Don't think that I am begging of you to be my partner! Do as you like."

Serge caught hold of the paper and, having signed it, handed it to the financier.

"All right," said Herzog. "I shall leave to-night and be absent three days. Watch the money market. You will see the results of my calculations."

And shaking hands with the Prince, Herzog went to the cashier to get the scrip and deposit the receipt.

CHAPTER XIX

SIN GROWS BOLDER



HERE was a party at Cayrol's. In the drawing-rooms of the mansion in the Rue Taitbout everything was resplendent with lights, and there was quite a profusion of flowers. Cayrol had thought of postponing the party, but was afraid of rousing anxieties, and like an actor who, though he has just lost his father, must play the following day, so Cayrol gave his party and showed a smiling face, so as to prevent harm to his business.

Matters had taken a turn for the worse during the last three days. The bold stroke, to carry out which Herzog had gone to London so as to be more secret, had been got wind of. The fall of the shares had not taken place. Working with considerable sums of money, the loss on the difference was as great as the gains would have been. The shares belonging to the European Credit Company had defrayed the cost of the game. It was a disaster. Cayrol, in his anxiety, had applied for the scrip and had only found the receipt given to the cashier. Although the transaction was most irregular, Cayrol had not said anything; but, utterly cast down, had gone to Madame Desvarennes to tell her of the fact.

GEORGES OHNET

The Prince was in bed, pretending to be ill. His wife, happily ignorant of all that was going on, rejoiced secretly at his indisposition because she was allowed to nurse him and have him all to herself. Panine, alarmed at the check they had experienced, was expecting Herzog with feverish impatience, and to keep out of sight had chosen the privacy of his own room.

Still, Cayrol had been allowed to see him, and with great circumspection told him that his non-appearance at the same time that Herzog was absent was most fatal for the Universal Credit Company. It was absolutely necessary that he should be seen in public. He must come to his party, and appear with a calm face. Serge promised to come, and had imposed on Micheline the heavy task of accompanying him to Jeanne's. It was the first time since her return from Nice that she had entered the house of her husband's mistress.

The concert was over, and a crowd of guests were coming from the large drawing-room to the boudoir and little drawing-room.

"The symphony is over. Ouf!" said Savinien, yawning.

"You don't like music?" asked Maréchal, with a laugh.

"Yes, military music. But two hours of Schumann and Mendelssohn at high pressure is too much for one man. But I say, Maréchal, what do you think of Mademoiselle Herzog's being at Cayrol's soirée. It is a little too strong."

"How so?"

"Why, the father has bolted, and the daughter is

SERGE PANINE

preparing a dance. Each has a different way of using their feet."

"Very pretty, Monsieur Desvarennnes, but I advise you to keep your flashes of wit to yourself," said Maréchal, seriously. "That may not suit everybody."

"Oh, Maréchal, you, too, making a fuss!"

And turning on his heel, he went to the refreshment table.

Prince and Princess Panine were just coming in. Micheline was smiling, and Serge was pale, though calm. Cayrol and Jeanne came toward them. Everybody turned to look at them. Jeanne, without embarrassment, shook hands with her friend. Cayrol bowed respectfully to Micheline.

"Princess," he said, "will you honor me by taking my arm? You are just in time, they are going to begin dancing."

"Not myself, though, thank you," replied Micheline, with a sad smile, "I am still very weak, but I will look on."

And on Cayrol's arm she entered the large drawing-room. Serge followed with Jeanne.

The festivities were at their height. The orchestra was playing a waltz, and in a whirl of silk and gauze the young people seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Suzanne Herzog was sitting alone near a window, in a simple white dress, and without a single ornament. Maréchal had just approached her, and she had welcomed him with a smile.

GEORGES OHNET

"Are you not dancing to-night, Mademoiselle?" he asked.

"I am waiting to be invited," she answered, sadly, "and, like sister Anne, I see nobody coming. There are ugly reports abroad about my father's fortune, and the Argonauts are drawing off."

"Will you give me a dance?" said Maréchal. "I don't dance to perfection, never having practised much, but with a good will——"

"Thank you, Monsieur Maréchal, I would rather talk. I am not very cheerful to-night, and, believe me, I only came because Madame Desvarennes wished it. I would rather have remained at home. Business has gone wrong with my father by what I can hear, for I don't know what goes on at the office. I feel more inclined to cry than to laugh. Not that I regret the loss of money, you know; I don't care for it, but my father must be in despair."

Maréchal listened silently to Suzanne, not daring to tell her what he thought of Herzog, and respected the real ignorance or willing blindness of the young girl who did not doubt her father's loyalty.

The Princess, leaning on Cayrol's arm, had just finished promenading round the rooms, when she perceived Suzanne and, leaving the banker, came and seated herself beside her. Many of the guests looked at each other and whispered words which Micheline did not hear, and if she had heard would not have understood. "It is heroic!" some said. Others answered, "It is the height of impudence."

The Princess was talking with Suzanne and was look-

SERGE PANINE

ing at her husband who, leaning against a door, was following Jeanne with his eyes.

At a sign from Cayrol, Maréchal left the room. The secretary joined Madame Desvarennes, who had come with Pierre and had remained in Cayrol's private office. During this party matters of moment were to be discussed, and a consultation was about to take place between the interested parties. On seeing Maréchal enter, Madame only uttered one word:

"Cayrol?"

"Here he is," answered the secretary.

Cayrol came in, hurriedly.

"Well," he asked, with great anxiety, "have you any news?"

"Pierre has just come from London," answered the mistress. "What we feared is true. Herzog, conjointly with my son-in-law, has made use of the ten millions belonging to the European Credit."

"Do you think that Herzog has really bolted?" inquired Maréchal.

"No! he is too deep for that," replied Cayrol. "He will return. He knows that in compromising the Prince it is as if he had compromised the firm of Desvarennes, therefore he is quite easy on the matter."

"Can the one be saved without the other?" asked the mistress.

"It is impossible. Herzog has so firmly bound up his interests with those of the Prince that it will be necessary to extricate both or let both perish together."

"Well, we must save Herzog into the bargain, then!"

GEORGES OHNET

said Madame Desvarennes, coldly. "But by what means?"

"These," answered Cayrol. "The shares taken away by Herzog, under the security of the Prince's signature, were deposited by the shareholders. When the Universal Credit removed to its new offices, these shares were taken away by mistake. It will suffice to replace the scrip. I will give back the receipt to the Prince and all trace of this deplorable affair will be wiped out."

"But the numbers of the shares will not be the same," said Madame Desvarennes, accustomed to minute regularity in all operations.

"We can explain the change by feigning a sale when they were high, and buying them up when low. We will show a profit, and the shareholders will not quarrel. Besides, I reserve the right of divulging Herzog's fraud without implicating Panine, if the shareholders insist. Trust me, I will catch Herzog another time. It is my stupid confidence in that man which has been partly the cause of this disaster. I will make your business mine and force him to shell out. I shall leave for London to-night, by the 1.50 train. Promptness of action in such a case is the first step toward success."

"Thank you, Cayrol," said the mistress. "Have my daughter and the Prince arrived?"

"Yes, Serge is calm; he has more power over himself than I could have believed."

"What does it matter to him what is going on? Is it he who will feel the blow? No. He knows that I shall go on working to keep him in idleness and maintain him in luxury. I may think myself lucky if he is reclaimed

SERGE PANINE

by this hard lesson, and does not again begin to rummage in other people's safes, for then I should be unable to save him."

The mistress rose and, with flashing eyes, walked up and down the room.

"Oh, the wretch!" she said. "If ever my daughter ceases to come between him and me!"

A terrible gesture finished the sentence.

Cayrol, Maréchal, and Pierre looked at each other. The same thought came to their minds, dark and fearful. In a paroxysm of rage this fond mother, this energetic and passionate woman, would be capable of killing any one.

"You remember what I told you one day," murmured Maréchal, approaching Cayrol.

"I would prefer the hatred of ten men to that of such a woman," answered Cayrol.

"Cayrol!" continued Madame Desvarennes, after a few moments of meditation, "the conduct of the business of which you spoke to us a little while ago depends solely on you, does it not?"

"On me alone."

"Do it at once, then, cost me what it may. Has it been noised abroad?"

"No one has the slightest suspicion. I have not mentioned it to a living soul," said the banker—"except to my wife," added he with a frankness which drew a smile from Pierre. "But my wife and I are one."

"What did she say?" asked Madame Desvarennes, looking straight at Cayrol.

GEORGES OHNET

"If I had been the person concerned," he said, "she could not possibly have been more affected. She loves you so much, Madame, you and those belonging to you. She besought me to do all in my power to get the Prince out of this scrape. She had tears in her eyes. And, truly, if I did not feel bound to serve you from gratitude I would do it for her sake and to give her pleasure. I was touched, I can assure you. Really, she has a heart!"

Maréchal exchanged a look with Madame Desvarennnes, who advanced toward the banker, and shook him by the hand, saying:

"Cayrol, you are truly a good man!"

"I know it," said Cayrol, smiling to hide his emotion, "and you may rely upon me."

Micheline appeared on the threshold of the room. Through the half-open door the dancers could be seen passing to and fro, and the sound of music floated in the air.

"What has become of you, mamma? I hear that you have been here for more than an hour."

"I was talking on business matters with these gentlemen," answered Madame Desvarennnes, smoothing from her brow the traces of her cares by an effort of will. "But you, dear, how do you feel? Are you not tired?"

"Not more so than usual," replied Micheline, looking round to follow the movements of her husband, who was trying to reach Jeanne.

"Why did you come to this party? It was unwise."

SERGE PANINE

"Serge wished me to come, and I did not care to let him come without me."

"Eh! dear me!" exclaimed Madame Desvarennes. "Let him do what he likes. Men are savages. When you are ill it won't hurt him."

"I am not ill, and I won't be," resumed Micheline, warmly. "We are going away now."

She motioned to Serge with her fan. Panine came to her.

"You will take me home, won't you, Serge?"

"Certainly, dear one," answered Serge.

Jeanne, who was listening at a distance, raised her hand to her forehead as a sign that she wanted him. A feeling of surprise came over the Prince, and he did not understand what she meant. Micheline had seen the sign. A deadly pallor spread over her features, and a cold perspiration broke out on her forehead. She felt so ill that she could have cried out. It was the first time she had seen Serge and Jeanne together since the dreadful discovery at Nice. She had avoided witnessing their meeting, feeling uncertain of herself, and fearing to lose her self-control. But seeing the two lovers before her, devouring each other with their looks, and making signs to each other, made her feel most terribly jealous and angry.

Serge had decided to obey the imperious signs which Jeanne made to him, and turning toward his wife, said:

"I remember now, my dear, that before going home I must call at the club. I promised, and cannot put it off. Excuse my not going with you, and ask your mother to accompany you."

GEORGES OHNET

"Very well," said Micheline, in a trembling voice.
"I will ask her. You are not going just yet?"

"In a moment."

"I, too, shall leave in a moment."

The young wife did not want to lose one detail of the horrible comedy being played under her very eyes. She remained to learn, unawares, the reason for which Jeanne kept her husband.

Not thinking that he was watched, Serge had gone across to Jeanne, and affecting a smile, inquired:

"What is the matter?"

"Serious news." And she explained that she must speak to her lover that evening.

"Where?" Serge asked, with astonishment.

"Here," answered Jeanne.

"But your husband?" the Prince said.

"Is leaving in an hour. Our guests will not remain late. Go to the garden, and wait in the pavilion. The door of the back stairs leading to my dressing-room will be open. When everybody has gone, come up."

"Take care; we are observed," said Serge, uneasily.

And they began to laugh with affectation and talked aloud about frivolous things, as if nothing serious were occupying their thoughts. Cayrol had come back again. He went up to Madame Desvarennes, who was talking with her daughter, and, full of business, thoughtlessly said:

"I will telegraph you as soon as I reach London."

"Are you going away?" inquired Micheline, a light dawning on her mind.

SERGE PANINE

"Yes," said Cayrol; "I have an important matter to settle."

"And when do you start?" continued Micheline, in such a changed voice that her mother was frightened.

"In a moment," answered the banker. "Allow me to leave you. I have several orders to give."

And leaving the boudoir, he regained the little drawing-room.

Micheline, with clinched hands and fixed gaze, was saying to herself:

"She will be alone to-night, and has asked him to come to her. He told me an untruth about his having to go to the club. He is going to see her!"

And passing her hand across her brow, as if to drive away an unpleasant thought, the young wife remained silent, dismayed and crushed.

"Micheline, what is the matter with you?" asked Madame Desvarennes, seizing her daughter's hand, which was icy cold.

"Nothing," stammered Micheline.

"You are ill, I see. Come, let us go home. Come and kiss Jeanne——"

"I!" cried Micheline, with horror, instinctively recoiling as if dreading some impure contact.

Madame Desvarennes became suddenly cold and calm. She foresaw a terrible revelation, and observing her daughter narrowly, said:

"Why do you cry out when I speak of your kissing Jeanne? Whatever is the matter?"

Micheline grasped her mother's arm, and pointed to Serge and Jeanne, who were in the little drawing-room,

GEORGES OHNET

laughing and talking, surrounded by a group of people, yet alone.

"Look at them!" she cried.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the mother in agony. She read the truth in her daughter's eyes.

"You know—" she began.

"That he is her lover," cried Micheline, interrupting her. "Don't you see that I am dying through it?" she added, sobbing bitterly and falling into her mother's arms.

The mistress carried her as if she had been a child into Cayrol's private office, and shut the door. Then, kneeling beside the couch on which Micheline was stretched, she gave vent to her grief. She begged her daughter to speak to her, and warmed her hands with kisses; then, seeing her still cold and motionless, she was frightened, and wanted to call for help.

"No; be quiet!" murmured Micheline, recovering. "Let no one know. I ought to have held my peace; but I have suffered so much I could not help myself. My life is blasted, you see. Take me away; save me from this infamy! Jeanne, my sister, and Serge. Oh! make me forget it! For pity's sake, mamma, you who are so strong, you who have always done what you wished, take from my heart all the pain that is there!"

Madame Desvarennes, overcome by such a load of grief, lost command of herself, and, quite broken-hearted, began to cry and moan.

"O God! Micheline, my poor child! you were suffering so and did not tell me. Oh! I knew you no longer trusted your old mother. And I stupidly did not guess

SERGE PANINE

it! I said to myself, at least she knows nothing about it, and sacrificed everything to keep the knowledge of their wrong-doing from you. Don't cry any more, darling, you will break my heart. I, who would have given up everything in the world to see you happy! Oh, I have loved you too much! How I am punished!"

"It is I who am punished," said Micheline, sobbing, "for not obeying you. Ah! children ought always to heed their mother. She divines the danger. Is it not too horrible, mamma? I, who have sacrificed everything for him, to think that he does not love me, and never will love me! What will my life be without confidence, hope, or affection? I am too unhappy. It would be better to die!"

"Die! you!" cried her mother, whose eyes, wet with tears, dried in a moment, as if by an inward fire. "Die! Come, don't talk such nonsense! Because a man treats you with scorn and betrays you? Are men worth dying for? No, you shall live, my darling, with your old mother. You shall have a deed of separation from your husband."

"And he will be free," exclaimed Micheline, angrily. "He will go on loving her! Oh! I cannot bear that thought. Do you know, what I am going to tell you seems awful. I love him so much, that I would rather see him dead than unfaithful."

Madame Desvarennnes was struck, and remained silent. Serge dead! That idea had already occurred to her as a dream of deliverance. It came upon her peremptorily, violently, irresistibly. She repelled it with an effort.

GEORGES OHNET

"I can never think of him but as vile and odious," continued Micheline. "Every day his sin will seem more dastardly and his hypocrisy more base. There, a little while ago, he was smiling; and do you know why? Because Cayrol is going away, and during his absence Serge will return here to-night."

"Who told you?"

"I read it in his joyful looks. I love him. He cannot hide anything from me. A traitor to me, and a traitor toward his friend, that is the man whom—I am ashamed to own it—I love!"

"Compose yourself! Some one is coming," said Madame Desvarennes, and at the same time the door opened and Jeanne appeared, followed by Maréchal, who was anxious at their disappearance.

"Is Micheline ill?" inquired Madame Cayrol, coming forward.

"No; it is nothing. Just a little fatigue," said Madame Desvarennes. "Maréchal, give my daughter your arm, and take her to her carriage. I shall be down in a minute."

And holding Jeanne by the hand to prevent her following Micheline, she added:

"Stay; I have something to say to you."

Jeanne looked surprised. Madame Desvarennes was silent for a moment. She was thinking about Serge coming there that night. She had only to say one word to Cayrol to prevent his going away. The life of this wretch was entirely in her hands then! But Jeanne! Was she going to ruin her? Had she the right thus to destroy one who had struggled and had defended her-

SERGE PANINE

self? Would it be just? Jeanne had been led on against her will. She must question her. If the poor girl were suffering, if she repented, she must spare her.

Madame Desvarennnes, having thus made up her mind, turned toward Jeanne who was waiting.

"It is a long time since I have seen you, my dear, and I find you happy and smiling. It is the first time since your marriage that you have seemed so happy."

Jeanne looked at the mistress without answering. In these words she detected irony.

"You have found peace," continued Madame Desvarennnes, looking steadfastly at Jeanne with her piercing eyes. "You see, my dear, when you have a clear conscience—for you have nothing to reproach yourself with?"

Jeanne saw in this sentence a question and not an affirmation. She answered, boldly:

"Nothing!"

"You know that I love you, and would be most lenient," continued Madame Desvarennnes, sweetly, "and that you might safely confide in me!"

"I have nothing to fear, having nothing to tell," said Jeanne.

"Nothing?" repeated the mistress, with emphasis.

"Nothing," affirmed Jeanne.

Madame Desvarennnes once more looked at her adopted daughter as if she would read her very soul. She found her quite calm.

"Very well, then!" said she, hastily walking toward the door.

GEORGES OHNET

"Are you going already?" asked Jeanne, offering her brow to Madame Desvarennes's lips.

"Yes, good-by!" said the latter, with an icy kiss.

Jeanne, without again turning round, went into the drawing-room. At the same moment, Cayrol, in a travelling-coat, entered the office, followed by Pierre.

"Here I am, quite ready," said the banker to Madame Desvarennes. "Have you any new suggestion to make to me, or anything else to say?"

"Yes," replied Madame Desvarennes, in a stern voice which made Cayrol start.

"Then make haste. I have only a moment to spare, and you know the train waits for no one."

"You will not go!"

Cayrol, in amazement, answered:

"Do you mean it? Your interests are at stake yonder."

"Your honor is in danger here," cried the mistress, vehemently.

"My honor!" repeated Cayrol, starting back. "Madame, do you know what you are saying?"

"Ay!" answered Madame Desvarennes. "And do you remember what I promised you? I undertook to warn you, myself, if ever the day came when you would be threatened."

"Well?" questioned Cayrol, turning quite livid.

"Well! I keep my promise. If you wish to know who your rival is, come home to-night."

Some inaudible words rattled in Cayrol's throat.

"A rival! in my house! Can Jeanne be guilty? Do you know, if it is true I will kill them both!"

SERGE PANINE

"Deal with them as your conscience dictates," said Madame Desvarennnes. "I have acted according to mine."

Pierre, hitherto dumb with horror at the scene of which he had been a witness, shook off his stupor, and going up to Madame Desvarennnes, said:

"Madame, do you know that what you have just done is frightful!"

"How? That man will be acting within his rights the same as I am. They are seeking to take away his wife, and they are killing my daughter, and dishonoring me! We are defending ourselves! Woe to those who are guilty of the crime!"

Cayrol had fallen, as if thunderstruck, on a chair, with haggard eyes; his voice was gone, and he looked the image of despair. Madame Desvarennnes's words came back to him like the refrain of a hated song. To himself he kept repeating, without being able to chase away the one haunting thought: "Her lover, to-night, at your house!" He felt as if he were going mad. He was afraid he should not have time to wreak his vengeance. He made a terrible effort, and, moaning with grief, he arose.

"Take care!" said Pierre. "Here's your wife."

Cayrol eyed Jeanne, who was approaching. Burning tears came to his eyes. He murmured:

"She, with a look so pure, and a face so calm! Is it possible?"

He nodded a farewell to Pierre and Madame Desvarennnes, who were leaving, and recovering himself, advanced to meet Jeanne.

GEORGES OHNET

"Are you off?" she inquired. "You know you have no time to lose!"

Cayrol shuddered. She seemed anxious to get rid of him.

"I have still a few minutes to spend with you," he said, with emotion. "You see, Jeanne, I am sad at going away alone. It is the first time I have left you. In a moment our guests will be gone—I beg of you, come with me!"

Jeanne smiled.

"But you see, dear, I am in evening dress."

"The night of our marriage I brought you away from Cernay like that. Wrap yourself up in your furs, and come! Give me this proof of affection. I deserve it. I am not a bad man—and I love you so!"

Jeanne frowned. This pressing vexed her.

"This is childish," she said. "You will return the day after to-morrow, and I am tired. Have some pity for me."

"You refuse?" asked Cayrol, becoming gloomy and serious.

Jeanne touched his face slightly with her white hand.

"Come! Don't leave me in a temper! You won't miss me much, you will sleep all the way. Good-by!"

Cayrol kissed her; in a choking voice, he said:

"Good-by!"

And he left her.

Jeanne's face brightened, as she stood listening for a moment and heard the carriage which contained her husband rolling away. Uttering a sigh of relief, she murmured:

"At last!"

CHAPTER XX

THE CRISIS



JANNE, in her bedroom, had just taken off her ball-dress to put on a dressing-gown of Oriental cloth richly embroidered with silk flowers. Leaning her elbows on the mantelpiece, and breathing heavily, she was waiting. Her maid came in, bringing a second lamp. The additional light displayed the rich warm hangings of ruby plush embroidered in dull gold. The bed seemed one mass of lace.

"Has everybody gone?" asked Jeanne, pretending to yawn.

"Messieurs Le Brède and Du Tremblay, the last guests, are just putting on their overcoats," answered the maid. "But Monsieur Pierre Delarue has come back, and is asking whether Madame will speak with him for a moment."

"Monsieur Delarue?" repeated Jeanne, with astonishment.

"He says he has something important to say to Madame."

"Where is he?" asked Jeanne.

"There, in the gallery. The lights were being put out in the drawing-room."

"Well, show him in."

GEORGES OHNET

The maid went out. Jeanne, much puzzled, asked herself, what could have brought Pierre back? It must certainly be something very important. She had always felt somewhat awed in Pierre's presence. At that moment the idea of being face to face with the young man was most distressing to her.

A curtain was lifted and Pierre appeared. He remained silent and confused at the entrance of the room, his courage had deserted him.

"Well," said Jeanne, with assumed stiffness, "whatever is the matter, my friend?"

"The matter is, my dear Jeanne," began Pierre, "that——"

But the explanation did not seem so very easy to give, for he stopped and could not go on.

"That?" repeated Madame Cayrol.

"I beg your pardon," resumed Pierre. "I am greatly embarrassed. In coming here I obeyed a sudden impulse. I did not think of the manner in which I should tell you what I have to say, and I see that I shall have to run a great risk of offending you."

Jeanne assumed a haughty air.

"Well, but, my dear friend, if what you have to say is so difficult, don't say it."

"Impossible!" retorted Pierre. "My silence would cause irreparable mischief. In mercy, Jeanne, make my task easier! Meet me half way! You have projects for to-night which are known. Danger threatens you. Take care!"

Jeanne shuddered. But controlling herself, she answered, laughing nervously:

SERGE PANINE

"What rubbish are you talking about? I am at home, surrounded by my servants, and I have nothing to fear. I beg of you to believe me."

"You deny it!" exclaimed Pierre. "I expected as much. But you are only taking useless trouble. Come, Jeanne, I am the friend of your childhood; you have no reason to fear aught from me. I am only trying to be of use to you. You must know that, by my coming here, I know all. Jeanne, listen to me!"

"Are you mad?" interrupted the young woman, proudly, "or are you taking part in some absurd joke?"

"I am in my right mind, unfortunately for you!" said Pierre, roughly, seeing that Jeanne refused to believe him. "And there is no joke in the matter. Everything is true, serious and terrible! Since you compel me to say things which may be unpalatable, they must out. Prince Panine is in your house, or he soon will be. Your husband, whom you think far away, is within call, perhaps, and will come and take you unawares. Is not that a serious matter?"

A frown overspread her face, and in an ungovernable rage she stepped forward, determined not to give in, and exclaimed:

"Go away! or I shall call for assistance!"

"Don't call, it would look bad!" resumed Pierre, calmly. "On the contrary, let the servants get out of the way, and get the Prince to go if he be here, or if he has not yet arrived, prevent his coming in. So long as I remain here you will dissimulate your fear and will not take any precautions. I will leave you, then. Adieu, Jeanne! Believe that I wished to render you a

GEORGES OHNET

service, and be sure that when I have crossed the threshold of this door I shall have forgotten everything that I may have said."

Pierre bowed, and, lifting the heavy curtain which hid the door leading to the gallery, went out.

He had hardly gone when the opposite door opened, and Serge entered the room. The young woman rushed into his arms and whispered into his ear, with trembling lips:

"Serge, we are lost!"

"I was there," answered Panine. "I heard all."

"What shall we do?" cried Jeanne, terrified.

"Go away at once. To remain here a moment longer is an imprudence."

"And I, if I remain, what shall I say to Cayrol when he comes?"

"Your husband!" said Serge, bitterly. "He loves you, he will forgive you."

"I know; but then we two shall be separated for ever. Is that what you desire?"

"And what can I do?" cried Serge, in despair. "Everything around me is giving way! Fortune, which has been my one aim in life, is escaping from me. The family which I have scorned is forsaking me. The friendship which I have betrayed overwhelms me. There is nothing left to me."

"And my love, my devotion?" exclaimed Jeanne, passionately. "Do you think that I will leave you? We must go away. I asked you long ago. You resisted; the moment has now come. Be easy! Madame Desvarennes will pay and save your name. In exchange

SERGE PANINE

you will give her back her daughter. You don't care about her, because you love me. I am your real wife; she who ought to share your life. Well, I take back my rights. I pay for them with my honor. I break all ties which could hold me back. I am yours, Serge! Our sin and misfortune will bind us more closely than any laws could."

"Think, that with me you will have to endure poverty, and, perhaps, misery," said the Prince, moved by the young woman's infatuation.

"My love will make you forget everything!"

"You will not feel regret or remorse?"

"Never, so long as you love me."

"Come, then," said the Prince, taking Jeanne in his arms. "And if life is too hard——"

"Well," added Jeanne, finishing the sentence with sparkling eyes, "we will seek refuge together in death! Come!"

Serge bolted the door, through which Pierre had passed, and which alone communicated with the other apartments. Then, taking his mistress by the hand, he went with her into the dressing-room. Jeanne threw a dark cloak round her shoulders, put a hat on her head, and without taking either money, jewels, lace, or, in fact, anything that she had received from Cayrol, they went down the little back stairs.

It was very dark. Jeanne did not take a light, as she did not care to attract attention, so they had to feel every step of the way as quietly as possible, striving not to make the least noise, holding their breath, and with beating hearts. When they reached the bottom of the

GEORGES OHNET

stairs, Jeanne stretched out her hand, and sought the handle of the door which opened into the courtyard. She turned it, but the door would not open. She pushed, but it did not give way. Jeanne uttered a low groan. Serge shook it vigorously, but it would not open.

"It has been fastened on the outside," he whispered.

"Fastened?" murmured Jeanne, seized with fear.
"Fastened, and by whom?"

Serge did not answer. The idea that Cayrol had done it came to his mind at once. The husband lying in wait, had seen him enter, and to prevent his escaping from his vengeance had cut off all means of retreating.

Silently, they went upstairs again, into the room through the dressing-room. Jeanne took off her bonnet and cloak, and sank into an armchair.

"I must get away!" said Serge, with suppressed rage; and he walked toward the door of the gallery.

"No! don't open that," cried Jeanne, excitedly.

And with a frightened look, she added:

"What if he were behind the door?"

At the same moment, as if Jeanne's voice had indeed evoked Cayrol, a heavy step was heard approaching along the gallery, a hand tried to open the bolted door. Serge and Jeanne remained motionless, waiting.

"Jeanne!" called the voice of Cayrol from the outside, sounding mournfully in the silence, "Jeanne, open!"

And with his fist he knocked imperatively on the woodwork.

"I know you are there! Open, I say!" he cried, with increasing rage. "If you don't open the door, I'll——"

SERGE PANINE

"Go! I beseech you!" whispered Jeanne, in Panine's ear. "Go downstairs again, and break open the door. You won't find any one there now."

"Perhaps he has stationed some one there," answered Serge. "Besides, I won't leave you here alone exposed to his violence."

"You are not alone. I can hear you talking!" said Cayrol, beside himself. "I shall break open this door!"

The husband made a tremendous effort. Under the pressure of his heavy weight the lock gave way. With a bound he was in the middle of the room. Jeanne threw herself before him; she no longer trembled. Cayrol took another step and fixed his glaring eyes on the man whom he sought, uttering a fearful oath.

"Serge!" cried he. "I might have guessed it. It is not only money of which you are robbing me, you villain!"

Panine turned horribly pale, and advanced toward Cayrol, despite Jeanne, who was clinging to him.

"Don't insult me; it is superfluous," said he. "My life belongs to you; you can take it. I shall be at your service whenever you please."

Cayrol burst into a fearful laugh.

"Ah! a duel! Come! Am I a gentleman? I am a plebeian! a rustic! a cowherd! you know that! I have you now! I am going to smash you!"

He looked round the room as if seeking a weapon, and caught sight of the heavy fire-dogs. He caught up one with a cry of triumph, and, brandishing it like a club, rushed at Serge.

More rapid than he, Jeanne threw herself before her

GEORGES OHNET

lover. She stretched out her arms, and with a sharp voice, and the look of a she-wolf defending her cubs,

"Keep behind me," said she to Serge; "he loves me and will not dare to strike!"

Cayrol had stopped. At these words he uttered a loud cry:

"Ah! wretched woman! You first, then!"

Raising his weapon, he was about to strike, when his eyes met Jeanne's. The young woman was smiling, happy to die for her lover. Her pale face beamed from out her black hair with weird beauty. Cayrol trembled. That look which he had loved, would he never see it again? That rosy mouth, whose smile he cherished, would it be hushed in death? A thousand thoughts of happy days came to his mind. His arm fell. A bitter flood rushed from his heart to his eyes; the iron dropped heavily from his hand on to the floor, and the poor man, overcome, sobbing, and ashamed of his weakness, fell senseless on a couch.

Jeanne did not utter a word. By a sign she showed Serge the door, which was open, and with a swollen heart she leaned on the mantelpiece, waiting for the unfortunate man, from whom she had received such a deep and sad proof of love, to come back to life.

Serge had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXI

“WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT”

HE night seemed long to Madame Desvarennes. Agitated and feverish, she listened through the silence, expecting every moment to hear some fearful news. In fancy she saw Cayrol entering his wife's room like a madman, unawares. She seemed to hear a cry of rage, answered by a sigh of terror; then a double shot resounded, the room filled with smoke, and, struck down in their guilty love, Serge and Jeanne rolled in death, interlaced in each other's arms, like Paolo and Francesca de Rimini, those sad lovers of whom Dante tells us.

Hour after hour passed; not a sound disturbed the mansion. The Prince had not come in. Madame Desvarennes, unable to lie in bed, arose, and now and again, to pass the time, stole on tiptoe to her daughter's room. Micheline, thoroughly exhausted with fatigue and emotion, had fallen asleep on her pillow, which was wet with tears.

Bending over her, by the light of the lamp, the mistress gazed at Micheline's pale face, and a sigh rose to her lips.

“She is still young,” she thought; “she may begin

GEORGES OHNET

life afresh. The remembrance of these sad days will be wiped out, and I shall see her revive and smile again. That wretch was nearly the death of her."

And the image of Serge and Jeanne stretched beside each other in the room full of smoke came before her eyes again. She shook her head to chase the unfortunate vision away, and noiselessly regained her own apartment.

The day dawned pale and bleak. Madame Desvarennes opened her window and cooled her burning brow in the fresh morning air. The birds were awake, and were singing on the trees in the garden.

Little by little, the distant sound of wheels rolling by was heard. The city was awakening from its sleep.

Madame Desvarennes rang and asked for Maréchal. The secretary appeared instantly. He, too, had shared the anxieties and fears of the mistress, and had risen early. Madame Desvarennes greeted him with a grateful smile. She felt that she was really loved by this good fellow, who understood her so thoroughly. She begged him to go to Cayrol's, and gain some information, without giving him further details, and she waited, walking up and down the room to calm the fever of her mind.

On leaving the house in the Rue Taitbout, Serge felt bewildered, not daring to go home, and unable to decide on any plan; yet feeling that it was necessary to fix on something without delay, he reached the club. The walk did him good, and restored his physical equilibrium. He was thankful to be alive after such a narrow escape. He went upstairs with a comparatively

SERGE PANINE

light step, and tossed his overcoat to a very sleepy footman who had risen to receive him. He went into the card-room. Baccarat was just finishing. It was three o'clock in the morning. The appearance of the Prince lent the game a little fresh animation. Serge plunged into it as if it were a battle. Luck was on his side. In a short time he cleared the bank: a thousand louis. One by one the players retired. Panine, left alone, threw himself on a couch and slept for a few hours, but it was not a refreshing sleep. On the contrary, it made him feel more tired.

The day servants disturbed him when they came in to sweep the rooms and open the windows. He went into the lavatory, and there bathed his face. When his ablutions were over he wrote a note to Jeanne, saying that he had reflected, and could not possibly let her go away with him. He implored her to do all in her power to forget him. He gave this letter to one of the messengers, and told him to give it into the hands of Madame Cayrol's maid, and to none other.

The care of a woman and the worry of another household seemed unbearable to him. Besides, what could he do with Jeanne? The presence of his mistress would prevent his being able to go back to Micheline. And now he felt that his only hope of safety was in Micheline's love for him.

But first of all he must go and see if Herzog had returned, and ascertain the real facts of the position in regard to the Universal Credit Company.

Herzog occupied a little house on the Boulevard Haussmann, which he had hired furnished from some

GEORGES OHNET

Americans. The loud luxury of the Yankees had not frightened him. On the contrary, he held that the gay colors of the furniture and the glitter of the gilded cornices were bound to have a fascination for prospective shareholders. Suzanne had reserved a little corner for herself, modestly hung with muslin and furnished with simple taste, which was a great contrast to the loud appearance of the other part of the house.

On arriving, Serge found a stableman washing a victoria. Herzog had returned. The Prince quietly went up the steps, and had himself announced.

The financier was sitting in his study by the window, looking through the newspapers. When Serge entered he rose. The two men stood facing each other for a moment. The Prince was the first to speak.

"How is it that you have kept me without news during your absence?" asked he, harshly.

"Because," replied Herzog, calmly, "the only news I had was not good news."

"At least I should have known it."

"Would the result of the operation have been different?"

"You have led me like a child in this affair," Serge continued, becoming animated. "I did not know where I was going. You made me promises, how have you kept them?"

"As I was able," quietly answered Herzog. "Play has its chances. One seeks Austerlitz and finds Waterloo."

"But," cried the Prince, angrily, "the shares which you sold ought not to have gone out of your hands."

SERGE PANINE

"You believed that?" retorted the financier, ironically. "If they ought not to have gone out of my hands it was hardly worth while putting them into them."

"In short," said Panine, eager to find some responsible party on whom he could pour out all the bitterness of his misfortune, "you took a mean advantage of me."

"Good! I expected you to say that!" returned Herzog, smiling. "If the business had succeeded, you would have accepted your share of the spoil without any scruples, and would have felt ready to crown me. It has failed; you are trying to get out of the responsibility, and are on the point of treating me as if I were a swindler. Still, the affair would not have been more honest in the first instance than in the second, but success embellishes everything."

Serge looked hard at Herzog.

"What is there to prove," replied he, "that this speculation, which brings ruin and loss to me, does not enrich you?"

"Ungrateful fellow!" observed the financier, ironically, "you suspect me!"

"Of having robbed me!" cried Serge, in a rage.
"Why not?"

Herzog, for a moment, lost his temper and turned red in the face. He seized Panine violently by the arm, and said:

"Gently, Prince; whatever insults you heap upon me must be shared by you. You are my partner."

"Scoundrel!" yelled Panine, exasperated at being held by Herzog.

GEORGES OHNET

"Personalities," said the financier, in a jesting tone.
"Then I take my leave!"

And loosing his hold of the Prince, he went toward the door.

Serge sprang after him, exclaiming:

"You shall not leave this room until you have given me the means of rectifying this disaster."

"Then let us talk sensibly, as boon companions," said Herzog. "I know of a marvellous move by which we can get out of the difficulty. Let us boldly call a general meeting. I will explain the thing, and amaze everybody. We shall get a vote of confidence for the past, with funds for the future. We shall be as white as snow, and the game is played. Are you in with me?"

"Enough," replied the Prince, intensely disgusted. "It does not suit me to do a yet more shameful thing in order to get out of this trouble. It is no use arguing further; we are lost."

"Only the weak allow themselves to be lost!" exclaimed the financier. "The strong defend themselves. You may give in if you like; I won't. Three times have I been ruined and three times have I risen again. My head is good! I am down now. I shall rise again, and when I am well off, and have a few millions to spare, I will settle old debts. Everybody will be astonished because they won't expect it, and I shall be more thought of than if I had paid up at the time."

"And if you are not allowed to go free?" asked Serge.
"What if they arrest you?"

"I shall be in Aix-la-Chapelle to-night," said Herzog. "From there I shall treat with the shareholders

SERGE PANINE

of the Universal Credit. People judge things better at a distance. Are you coming with me?"

"No," replied Serge, in a low voice.

"You are wrong. Fortune is capricious, and in six months we may be richer than we ever have been. But as you have decided, let me give you a piece of advice which will be worth the money you have lost. Confess all to your wife; she can get you out of this difficulty."

The financier held out a hand to Serge which he did not take.

"Ah! pride!" murmured Herzog. "After all it is your right—It is you who pay!"

Without answering a word the Prince went out.

At that same hour, Madame Desvarennnes, tired by long waiting, was pacing up and down her little drawing-room. A door opened and Maréchal, the long-looked for messenger, appeared. He had been to Cayrol's, but could not see him. The banker, who had shut himself up in his private office where he had worked all night, had given orders that no one should interrupt him. And as Madame Desvarennnes seemed to have a question on her lips which she dared not utter, Maréchal added that nothing unusual seemed to have happened at the house.

But as the mistress was thanking her secretary, the great gate swung on its hinges, and a carriage rolled into the courtyard. Maréchal flew to the window, and uttered one word,

"Cayrol!"

Madame Desvarennnes motioned to him to leave her, and the banker appeared on the threshold.

GEORGES OHNET

At a glance the mistress saw the ravages which the terrible night he had passed through had caused. Yesterday, the banker was rosy, firm, and upright as an oak, now he was bent, and withered like an old man. His hair had become gray about the temples, as if scorched by his burning thoughts. He was only the shadow of himself.

Madame Desvarennnes advanced toward him, and in one word asked a world of questions.

"Well?" she said.

Cayrol, gloomy and fierce, raised his eyes to the mistress, and answered:

"Nothing!"

"Did he not come?"

"Yes, he came. But I had not the necessary energy to kill him. I thought it was an easier matter to become a murderer. And you thought so too, eh?"

"Cayrol!" cried Madame Desvarennnes, shuddering, and troubled to find that she had been so easily understood by him whom she had armed on her behalf.

"The opportunity was a rare one, though," continued Cayrol, getting excited. "Fancy; I found them together under my own roof. The law allowed me, if not the actual right to kill them, at least an excuse if I did so. Well, at the decisive moment, when I ought to have struck the blow, my heart failed me. He lives, and Jeanne loves him."

There was a pause.

"What are you going to do?"

"Get rid of him in another way," answered Cayrol. "I had only two ways of killing him. One was to

SERGE PANINE

catch him in my own house, the other to call him out. My will failed me in the one case; my want of skill would fail me in the other. I will not fight Serge. Not because I fear death, for my life is blighted, and I don't value it; but if I were dead, Jeanne would belong to him, and I could not bear the thought of that even in death. I must separate them forever."

"And how?"

"By forcing him to disappear."

"And if he refuse?"

Cayrol shook his head menacingly, and exclaimed:
"I defy him! If he resist, I will bring him before
the assizes!"

"You?" said Madame Desvarennes, going nearer to Cayrol.

"Yes, I!" answered the banker, with energy.

"Wretched man! And my daughter?" cried the mistress. "Think well what you are saying! You would disgrace me and mine."

"Am I not dishonored myself?" asked Cayrol.
"Your son-in-law is a robber, who has defiled my home
and robbed my safe."

"An honest man does not seek to revenge himself
after the manner you suggest," said the mistress,
gravely.

"An honest man defends himself as he can. I am
not a knight. I am only a financier. Money is my
weapon. The Prince has stolen from me. I will have
him sentenced as a thief."

Madame Desvarennes frowned.

"Make out your account. I will pay it."

GEORGES OHNET

"Will you also pay me for my lost happiness?" cried the banker, exasperated. "Should I not rather have chosen to be ruined than be betrayed as I am? You can never repair the wrong he has done me. And then I am suffering so, I must have my revenge!"

"Ah! fool that you are," replied Madame Desvarennnes. "The guilty will not feel your blows, but the innocent. When my daughter and I are in despair will you be less unhappy! Oh! Cayrol, take heed that you lose not in dignity what you gain in revenge. The less one is respected by others the more one must respect one's self. Contempt and silence elevate the victim, while rage and hatred make him descend to the level of those who have outraged him."

"Let people judge me as they please. I care only for myself! I am a vulgar soul, and have a low mind—anything you like. But the idea that that woman belongs to another drives me mad. I ought to hate her, but, notwithstanding everything, I cannot live without her. If she will come back to me I will forgive her. It is ignoble! I feel it, but it is too strong for me. I adore her!"

Before that blind love Madame Desvarennnes shuddered. She thought of Micheline who loved Serge as Cayrol loved Jeanne.

"Suppose she chooses to go away with Serge," said the mistress to herself. In a moment she saw the house abandoned, Micheline and Serge in foreign lands, and she alone in the midst of her overthrown happiness, dying of sadness and regrets. She made a last effort to move Cayrol.

SERGE PANINE

"Come, must I appeal in vain? Can you forget that I was a sure and devoted friend to you, and that you owe your fortune to me? You are a good man and will not forget the past. You have been outraged and have the right of seeking revenge, but think that in carrying it out you will hurt two women who have never done you any harm. Be generous! Be just! Spare us!"

Cayrol remained silent; his face did not relax. After a moment he said:

"You see how low I have fallen, by not yielding at once to your supplications! Friendship, gratitude, generosity, all the good feelings I had, have been consumed by this execrable love. There is nothing left but love for her. For her, I forget everything. I degrade and debase myself. And what is worse than all, is that I know all this and yet I cannot help myself."

"Miserable man!" murmured the mistress.

"Oh! most miserable," sobbed Cayrol, falling into an armchair.

Madame Desvarennes approached him, and quietly placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Cayrol, you are weeping? Then, forgive."

The banker arose and, with lowering brow, said:

"No! my resolution is irrevocable. I wish to place a world between Jeanne and Serge. If he has not gone away by to-night my complaint will be lodged in the courts of justice."

Madame Desvarennes no longer persisted. She saw that the husband's heart was permanently closed.

"It is well. I thank you for having warned me. You might have taken action without doing so. Good-by,

GEORGES OHNET

Cayrol. I leave your conscience to judge between you and me."

The banker bowed, and murmured:
"Good-by!"

And with a heavy step, almost tottering, he went out.

The sun had risen, and lit up the trees in the garden. Nature seemed to be making holiday. The flowers perfumed the air, and in the deep blue sky swallows were flying to and fro. This earthly joy exasperated Madame Desvarennes. She would have liked the world to be in mourning. She closed the window hastily, and remained lost in her own reflections.

So everything was over! The great prosperity, the honor of the house, everything was foundering in a moment. Even her daughter might escape from her, and follow the infamous husband whom she adored in spite of his faults—perhaps because of his very faults—and might drag on a weary existence in a strange land, which would terminate in death.

For that sweet and delicate child could not live without material comforts and mental ease, and her husband was doomed to go on from bad to worse, and would drag her down with him! The mistress pictured her daughter, that child whom she had brought up with the tenderest care, dying on a pallet, and the husband, odious to the last, refusing her admission to the room where Micheline was in agony.

A fearful feeling of anger overcame her. Her motherly love gained the mastery, and in the silence of the room she roared out these words:

"That shall not be!"

SERGE PANINE

The opening of the door recalled her to her senses, and she rose. It was Maréchal, greatly agitated. After Cayrol's arrival, not knowing what to do, he had gone to the Universal Credit Company, and there, to his astonishment, had found the offices closed. He had heard from the porter, one of those superb personages dressed in blue and red cloth, who were so important in the eyes of the shareholders, that the evening before, owing to the complaint of a director, the police had entered the offices, and taken the books away, and that the official seal had been placed on the doors. Maréchal, much alarmed, had hastened back to Madame Desvarennnes to apprise her of the fact. It was evidently necessary to take immediate steps to meet this new complication. Was this indeed the beginning of legal proceedings? And if so how would the Prince come out of it?

Madame Desvarennnes listened to Maréchal, without uttering a word. Events were hurrying on even quicker than she had dreaded. The fears of the interested shareholders outran even the hatred of Cayrol. What would the judges call Herzog's underhand dealings? Would it be embezzlement? Or forgery? Would they come and arrest the Prince at her house? The house of Desvarennnes, which had never received a visit from a sheriff's officer, was it to be disgraced now by the presence of the police?

The mistress, in that fatal hour, became herself again. The strong-minded woman of old reappeared. Maréchal was more alarmed at this sudden vigor than he had been at her late depression. When he saw Ma-

GEORGES OHNET

dame Desvarennes going toward the door, he made an effort to detain her.

"Where are you going, Madame?" he inquired, with anxiety.

The mistress gave him a look that terrified him, and answered:

"I am going to square accounts with the Prince."

And, passing through the door leading to the little staircase, Madame Desvarennes went up to her son-in-law's rooms.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MOTHER'S REVENGE



N leaving Herzog, Serge had turned his steps toward the Rue Saint-Dominique. He had delayed the moment of going home as long as possible, but the streets were beginning to be crowded. He might meet some people of his acquaintance. He resolved to face what ever reception was awaiting him-

On the way, he was planning what course he should adopt to bring about a reconciliation with his redoubtable mother-in-law. He was no longer proud, but felt quite broken down. Only Madame Desvarennes could put him on his feet again; and, as cowardly in trouble as he had been insolent in prosperity, he accepted beforehand all that she might impose upon him; all, provided that she would cover him with her protection.

He was frightened, not knowing how deep Herzog had led him in the mire. His moral sense had disappeared, but he had a vague instinct of the danger he had incurred. The financier's last words came to his mind: "Confess all to your wife; she can get you out of this difficulty!" He understood the meaning of them, and resolved to follow the advice. Micheline

GEORGES OHNET

loved him. In appealing to her heart, deeply wounded as it was, he would have in her an ally, and he had long known that Madame Desvarennes could not oppose her daughter in anything.

He entered the house through the back garden gate, and regained his room without making the slightest noise. He dreaded meeting Madame Desvarennes before seeing Micheline. First he changed his attire; he had walked about Paris in evening clothes. Looking in the glass he was surprised at the alteration in his features. Was his beauty going too? What would become of him if he failed to please. And, like an actor who is about to play an important part, he paid great attention to the making up of his face. He wished once more to captivate his wife, as his safety depended on the impression he was about to make on her. At last, satisfied with himself, he tried to look smiling, and went to his wife's room.

Micheline was up.

At the sight of Serge she could not suppress an exclamation of surprise. It was a long time since he had discontinued these familiar visits. The presence of her beloved one in that room, which had seemed so empty when he was not there, made her feel happy, and she went to him with a smile, holding out her hand. Serge drew her gently toward him and kissed her hair.

"Up, already, dear child," said he, affectionately.

"I have scarcely slept," answered Micheline. "I was so anxious. I sat up for you part of the night. I had left you without saying good-night. It was the

SERGE PANINE

first time it had occurred, and I wanted to beg your pardon. But you came in very late——”

“Micheline, it is I who am ungrateful,” interrupted Panine, making the young wife sit down beside him. “It is I who must ask you to be indulgent.”

“Serge! I beg of you!” said the young wife, taking both his hands. “All is forgotten. I would not reproach you, I love you so much!”

Micheline’s face beamed with joy, and tears filled her eyes.

“You are weeping,” said Panine. “Ah! I feel the weight of my wrongs toward you. I see how deserving you are of respect and affection. I feel unworthy, and would kneel before you to say how I regret all the anxieties I have caused you, and that my only desire in the future will be to make you forget them.”

“Oh! speak on! speak on!” cried Micheline, with delight. “What happiness to hear you say such sweet words! Open your heart to me! You know I would die to please you. If you have any anxieties or annoyances confide in me. I can relieve them. Who could resist me when you are in question?”

“I have none, Micheline,” answered Serge, with the constrained manner of a man who is feigning. “Nothing but the regret of not having lived more for you.”

“Is the future not in store for us?” said the young wife, looking lovingly at him.

The Prince shook his head, saying:

“Who can answer for the future?”

Micheline came closer to her husband, not quite un-

GEORGES OHNET

derstanding what Serge meant, but her mind was on the alert, and in an alarmed tone, she resumed:

"What strange words you are uttering? Are we not both young? And, if you like, is there not much happiness in store for us?"

And she clung to him. Serge turned away.

"Oh, stay," she murmured, again putting her arms round him. "You are so truly mine at this moment!"

Panine saw that the opportunity for confessing all had come. He was able to bring tears to his eyes, and went toward the window as if to hide his emotion. Micheline followed him, and, in an eager tone, continued:

"Ah! I knew you were hiding something. You are unhappy or in pain; threatened perhaps? Ah! if you love me, tell me the truth!"

"Well, yes! It is true, I am threatened. I am suffering and unhappy! But don't expect a confession from me. I should blush to make it. But, thank Heaven, if I cannot extricate myself from the difficulty in which I am placed through my own folly and imprudence—there is yet another way out of it."

"Serge! you would kill yourself!" cried Micheline, terrified at the gesture Panine had made. "What would become of me then? But what is there that is so hard to explain? And to whom should it be said?"

"To your mother," answered Serge, bowing his head.

"To my mother? Very well, I will go to her. Oh! don't fear anything. I can defend you, and to strike you she will first have to attack me."

SERGE PANINE

Serge put his arms round Micheline, and with a kiss, the hypocrite inspired her whom he entrusted with his safety with indomitable courage.

"Wait for me here," added the young wife, and passing through the little drawing-room she reached the smoking-room.

She halted there a moment, out of breath and almost choked with emotion. The long expected day had arrived. Serge was coming back to her. She went on, and as she reached the door of the stair leading to her mother's rooms, she heard a light tap from without.

Greatly astonished, she opened the door, and suddenly drew back, uttering an exclamation. A woman, thickly veiled, stood before her.

At the sight of Micheline the stranger seemed inclined to turn and fly. But overcome with jealousy, the young wife seized her by the arm, dragged off her veil, and recognizing her, exclaimed:

"Jeanne!"

Madame Cayrol approached Micheline, and beseechingly stretched out her hands:

"Micheline! don't think—I come——"

"Hold your tongue!" cried Micheline. "Don't tell me any lies! I know all! You are my husband's mistress!"

Crushed by such a stroke, Jeanne hid her face in her hands and moaned:

"O God!"

"You must really be bold," continued Micheline, in a furious tone, "to seek him here, in my house, almost in my arms!"

GEORGES OINET

Jeanne drew herself up, blushing with shame and grief.

"Ah! don't think," she said, "that love brings me here."

"What is it then?" asked Micheline, contemptuously.

"The knowledge of inevitable and pressing danger which threatens Serge."

"A danger! Of what kind?"

"Compromised by Herzog, he is at the mercy of my husband, who has sworn to ruin him."

"Your husband!"

"Yes, he is his rival. If you could ruin me, would you not do it?" said Jeanne.

"You!" retorted Micheline, passionately. "Do you think I am going to worry about you? Serge is my first thought. You say you came to warn him. What must be done?"

"Without a moment's delay he must go away!"

A strange suspicion crossed Micheline's mind. She approached Jeanne, and looking earnestly at her, said:

"He must go away without delay, eh? And it is you, braving everything, without a thought of the trouble you leave behind you, who come to warn him? Ah! you mean to go with him?"

Jeanne hesitated a moment. Then, boldly and impudently, defying and almost threatening the legitimate wife:

"Well, yes, I wish to! Enough of dissimulation! I love him!" she exclaimed.

Micheline, transfigured by passion, strong, and

SERGE PANINE

ready for a struggle, threw herself in Jeanne's way, with arms outstretched, as if to prevent her going to Serge.

"Well!" she said; "try to take him from me!"

"Take him from you!" answered Jeanne, laughing like a mad woman. "To whom does he most belong? To the woman who was as ignorant of his love as she was of his danger; who could do nothing toward his happiness, and can do nothing for his safety? Or to the mistress who has sacrificed her honor to please him and risks her safety to save him?"

"Ah! wretch!" cried Micheline, "to invoke your infamy as a right!"

"Which of us has taken him from the other?" continued Jeanne, forgetting respect, modesty, everything. "Do you know that he loved me before he married you? Do you know that he abandoned me for you—for your money, I should say? Now, do you wish to weigh what I have suffered with what you suffer? Shall we make out a balance-sheet of our tears? Then, you will be able to tell which of us he has loved more, and to whom he really belongs."

Micheline had listened to this furious address almost in a state of stupor, and replied, vehemently:

"What matter who triumphs if his ruin is certain. Selfish creatures that we are, instead of disputing about his love, let us unite in saving him! You say he must go away! But flight is surely an admission of guilt—humiliation and obscurity in a strange land. And that is what you advise, because you hope to share that miserable existence with him. You are urging him on to

GEORGES OHNET

dishonor. His fate is in the hands of a man who adores you, who would sacrifice everything for you, as I would for Serge, and yet you have not thrown yourself at his feet! You have not offered your life as the price of your lover's! And you say that you love him!"

"Ah!" stammered Jeanne, distracted. "You wish me to save him for you!"

"Is that the cry of your heart?" said Micheline, with crushing disdain. "Well, see what I am ready to do. If, to remove your jealous fears, it is necessary to sacrifice myself, I swear to you that if Serge be saved, he shall be perfectly free, and I will never see him again!"

Micheline, chaste and calm, with hands raised to Heaven, seemed to grow taller and nobler. Jeanne, trembling and overpowered, looked at her rival with a painful effort, and murmured, softly:

"Would you do that?"

"I would do more!" said the lawful wife, bending before the mistress. "I ought to hate you, and I kneel at your feet and beseech you to listen to me. Do what I ask you and I will forgive you and bless you. Do not hesitate! Follow me! Let us throw ourselves at the feet of him whom you have outraged. His generosity cannot be less than ours, and to us, who sacrifice our love, he will not be able to refuse to sacrifice his vengeance."

This greatness and goodness awaked feelings in Jeanne's heart which she thought dead. She was silent for a moment and then her breast heaved with convulsive sobs, and she fell helpless into the arms which Micheline, full of pity, held out to her.

SERGE PANINE

"Forgive me," moaned the unhappy woman. "I am conquered. Your rights are sacred, and you have just made them still more so. Keep Serge: with you he will once more become honest and happy, because, if your love is not greater than mine, it is nobler and purer."

The two women went hand in hand to try to save the man whom they both adored.

All this time Serge remained in the little drawing-room enjoying the hope of returning peace. It was sweet to him, after the troubles he had gone through. He had not the slightest suspicion of the scene in the adjoining room between Jeanne and Micheline. The fond heroism of his wife and the self-denial of his mistress were unknown to him.

Time was passing. At least an hour had sped since Micheline left him to go to her mother, and Serge was beginning to think that the interview was very long, when a light step made him tremble. It came from the gallery. He thought it was Micheline, and opening the door, he went to meet her.

He drew back disappointed, vexed, and anxious, when he found it was Pierre. The two men had never met alone since that terrible night at Nice. Panine assumed a bold demeanor, and returned Pierre's firm look. Steadying his voice, he said:

"Ah! is it you?"

"Were you not expecting me?" answered Pierre whose harsh voice thrilled Serge.

The Prince opened his mouth to speak, but Pierre, did not give him time. In stern and provoking accents, he continued:

GEORGES OHNET

"I made you a promise once; have you forgotten it? I have a good memory. You are a villain, and I come to chastise you!"

"Pierre!" exclaimed the Prince, starting fiercely.

But he suddenly calmed himself, and added:

"Leave me! I will not listen to you!"

"You will have to, though! You are a source of trouble and shame to the family to which you have allied yourself, and as you have not the courage to kill yourself, I have come to help you. You must leave Paris to-night, or you will be arrested. We shall go together to Brussels and there we shall fight. If chance favors you, you will be at liberty to continue your infamies, but at any rate I shall have done my best to rid two unfortunate women of your presence."

"You are mad!" said Serge, sneeringly.

"Don't think so! And know that I am ready for any emergency. Come; must I strike you, to give you courage?" growled Pierre, ready to suit the action to the word.

"Ah! take care!" snarled Serge, with an evil look.

And opening a drawer which was close to him, he took out a revolver.

"Thief first, then murderer!" said Pierre, with a terrible laugh. "Come, let's see you do it!"

And he was going toward the Prince when the door opened, and Madame Desvarenes came forward. Placing her hand on Pierre's shoulder, she said, in that commanding tone which few could resist:

"Go; wait for me in my room. I wish it!"

Pierre bowed, and, without answering, went out,

SERGE PANINE

Serge had placed the pistol on the table and was waiting.

"We have to talk over several matters," said Madame Desvarennes, gravely, "and you know it."

"Yes, Madame," answered Panine, sadly, "and, believe me, no one judges my conduct more severely than I do."

The mistress could not help looking surprised.

"Ah!" she said, with irony, "I did not expect to find you in such a mood. You have not accustomed me to such humility and sweetness. You must be afraid, to have arrived at that stage!"

The Prince appeared not to have understood the implied insult in his mother-in-law's words. One thing struck him, which was that she evidently did not expect to find him repentant and humbled.

"Micheline must have told you," he began.

"I have not seen my daughter," interrupted the mistress, sharply, as if to make him understand that he must depend solely upon himself.

Ignorant that Micheline had met Jeanne on her way to her mother, and had gone to Cayrol, Serge thought he was abandoned by his only powerful ally. He saw that he was lost and that his feigned resignation was useless. Unable to control himself any longer, his face darkened with rage.

"She, too, against me! Well! I will defend myself alone!"

Turning toward Madame Desvarennes, he added:

"To begin with, what do you want with me?"

"I wish to ask you a question. We business folk

GEORGES OHNET

when we fail, and cannot pay our way, throw blood on the blot and it disappears. You members of the nobility, when you are disgraced, how do you manage?"

"If I am not mistaken, Madame," answered the Prince, in a light tone, "you do me the favor of asking what my intentions are for the future? I will answer you with precision. I purpose leaving to-night for Aix-la-Chapelle, where I shall join my friend Herzog. We shall begin our business again. My wife, on whose good feelings I rely, will accompany me, notwithstanding everything."

And in these last words he put all the venom of his soul.

"My daughter will not leave me!" exclaimed Madame Desvarennes.

"Very well, then, you can accompany her," retorted Panine. "That arrangement will suit me. Since my troubles I have learned to appreciate domestic happiness."

"Ah! you hope to play your old games on me," said Madame Desvarennes. "You won't get much out of me. My daughter and I with you—in the stream where you are going to sink? Never!"

"Well, then," cried Panine, "what do you expect?"

A violent ring at the front door resounded as Madame Desvarennes was about to answer, and stopped the words on her lips. This signal, which was used only on important occasions, sounded to Madame like a funeral knell. Serge frowned, and instinctively moved back.

Maréchal appeared through the half-open door with

SERGE PANINE

a scared face, and silently handed Madame Desvarennnes a card. She glanced at it, turned pale, and said to the secretary:

"Very well, let him wait!" She threw the card on the table. Serge came forward and read:

"Delbarre, sheriff's officer."

Haggard-looking and aghast, he turned to the mistress, as if seeking an explanation.

"Well!" she observed: "it is clear, he has come to arrest you."

Serge rushed to a cabinet, and opening a drawer, took forth some handfuls of gold and notes, which he crammed into his pockets.

"By the back stairs I shall have time to get away. It is my last chance! Keep the man for five minutes only."

"And if the door is guarded?" asked Madame Desvarennnes.

Serge remained abject before her. He felt himself enclosed in a ring which he could not break through.

"One may be prosecuted without being condemned," he gasped. "You will use your influence, I know, and you will get me out of this mess. I shall be grateful to you for ever, and will do anything you like! But don't leave me, it would be cowardly!"

He trembled, as he thus besought her distractedly.

"The son-in-law of Madame Desvarennnes does not go before the Assize Courts even to be acquitted," said she, with a firm voice.

"What would you have me do?" cried Serge, passionately.

GEORGES OHNET

Madame Desvarennes did not answer, but pointed to the revolver on the table.

"Kill myself? Ah! no; that would be giving you too much pleasure."

And he gave the weapon a push, so that it rolled close to Madame Desvarennes.

"Ah! wretch!" cried she, giving way to her suppressed rage. "You are not even a Panine! The Panines knew how to die."

"I have not time to act a melodrama with you," snarled Serge. "I am going to try to save myself."

And he took a step toward the door.

The mistress seized the revolver, and threw herself before him.

"You shall not go out!" she cried.

"Are you mad?" he exclaimed, gnashing his teeth.

"You shall not go out!" repeated the mistress, with flashing eyes.

"We shall see!"

And with a strong arm he seized Madame Desvarennes, and threw her aside.

The mistress became livid. Serge had his hand on the handle of the door. He was about to escape. Madame Desvarennes's arm was stretched forth.

A shot made the windows rattle; the weapon fell from her hand, having done its work and, amid the smoke, a body dropped heavily on the carpet, which was soon dyed with blood.

At the same moment, the door opened, and Micheline entered, holding in her hand the fatal receipt which she had just wrung from Cayrol. The young wife ut-

SERGE PANINE

tered a heartrending cry, and fell senseless on Serge's body.

Behind Micheline came the officer and Maréchal. The secretary exchanged looks with the mistress, who was lifting her fainting daughter and clasping her in her arms. He understood all.

Turning toward his companion, he said:

"Alas! sir, here is a sad matter! The Prince, on hearing that you had come, took fright, although his fault was not very serious, and has shot himself."

The officer bowed respectfully to the mistress, who was bending over Micheline.

"Please to withdraw, Madame. You have already suffered too much," said he. "I understand your legitimate grief. If I need any information, this gentleman will give it to me."

Madame Desvarennes arose, and, without bending under the burden, she bore away on her bosom her daughter, regained.





**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET**

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

PQ Ohnet, Georges
2378 Serge Panine
03S413
1908

